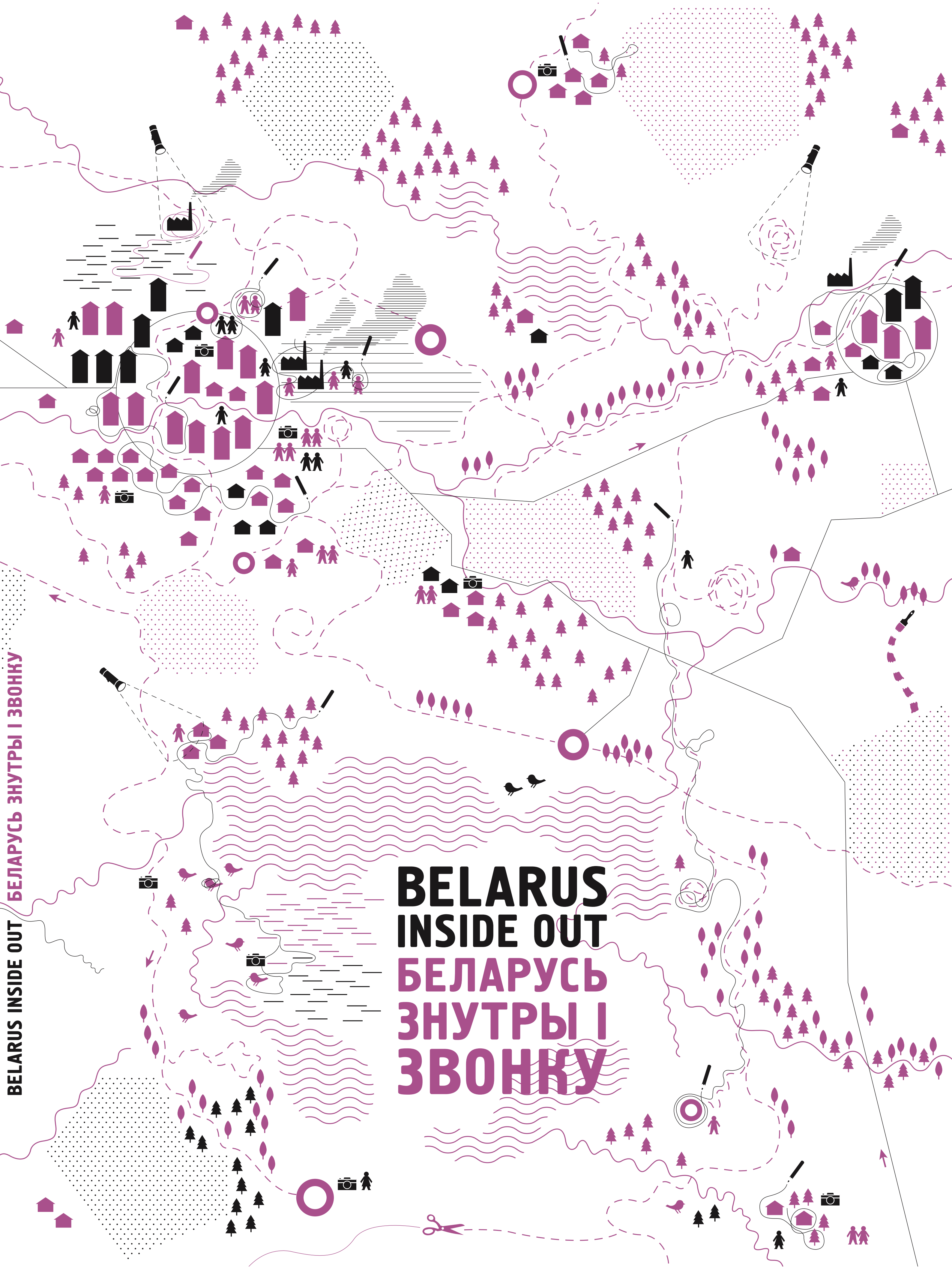
BELARUS INSIDE OUT
БЕЛАРУСЬ ЗНУТРЫ І ЗВОНКУ



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DEAR READERS
ДАРАГІЯ ЧЫТАЧЫ

Belarus Inside Out is a co-production of Berlin based magazine *Plotki*, Belarusian Internet community *Generation.BY* and Belarusian civic journalism platform *iBelarus.net*. We invite you to follow us through the cities, villages and swamps of Belarus: To discover what is happening beyond the European Union's Eastern border, if you're living within this relatively new political space, which tends to see itself as «Europe» as such; Or to shift your point of view for a little while and see your home country through the strange and /or familiar eyes of our authors if you're a citizen of Belarus; or to see what is similar or different to your own experience if you're from further a field.

All the texts and pictures presented here are the result of cooperation between young journalists, photographers, and writers from Belarus and several EU-countries, who met for a ten day trip to Miensk and the regions of Belarus in August 2009. We traveled the country in tandem groups and, on our way, picked up on some of the aspects of Belarusian reality that seemed noteworthy and crucial to us.

Can exile really be hereditary? Would it be a good idea to turn Miensk into a museum of Soviet architecture? What is left of the huge swamp system that once covered a third of Belarus' territory? What is the price of a free university education? Is the Belarusian village dying or being revived by young families moving to newly founded eco villages? What situation are female pensioners facing in Belarus today? Who are the young, well educated civil and cultural activists that form the face of this post-Soviet country – within, beyond, in spite of, political restriction? Is there such a thing as Belarusian identity today?

At first sight we «all look the same». We are all young, educated, active citizens of the modern globalized world, well acquainted with traveling, but also with the virtual space and the opportunities it provides. We have agreed on a common perspective. Then again, in spite of our e-mails and skypes and facebooks, our iPhones and MP3s, there may be moments when we are confronted with the fact that our identities have been shaped by different experiences, and that certain memories, opinions and choices separate us from each other: Belarusian and EU citizens, former Eastern Europeans and former Western Europeans or older or younger generations, the lines are shifting, crossover possible. Thus, the perspectives on our common topic are manifold. Reflections expressed in the project represent the ideas and opinions of individual authors. Personal perceptions, expectations, and preset opinions are reflected in the texts and pictures. And the difference that we sometimes faced in working together shines through the texts and pictures as well and gives them their special quality, beyond just conveying some exotic information about an unknown Belarus.

With Belarusian language playing such a pivotal role in the political and personal self-definition of Belarusians today, it was our original intention to print the whole issue bilingually in Belarusian and English. We truly regret, that the financial restrictions that a non-profit project like ours has faced during times of severe financial crisis have limited our enterprise to the form it takes today. Thus, in this printed issue you will find a full English version of all the texts and some passages in Belarusian. You can, however, read the full Belarusian versions online, and there is also additional audio-visual material to discover on www.bio.generation.by.

In spite of this, we have tried to give the Belarusian language as much space as possible in this print issue. Thus, while traveling in our footsteps, you will be passing through the Belarusian cities of Miensk, Viciebsk and Homiel instead of Minsk, Vitebsk and Gomel. You will hear the opinions of Kacia, Alaksiej and Taciana, instead of Katya, Aleksey and Tatyana. When you take a closer look, you may find that the real difference is not as big as it seemed at first: Just play around a little and replace a «ia» with a «ya», an «ie» with an «e», an «h» with a «g», for example... and the Russian or Polish spelling of the name or place, which looks more familiar for historical reasons, will appear before your eyes. And maybe you will even start to enjoy trying to discover the familiar in what initially seemed to be so unfamiliar.

Belarus Inside Out aims to provide you with facts and stories about some of the less «typical» aspects of life in Belarus today.

So, when you follow us on our trip, you may find that by approaching the unknown, you find yourself on a path that leads you back to the steps at your own back door...

Belarus Inside Out – гэта супольны прадукт бэрлінскага часопіса Plotki, беларускай Інтэрнэт-суполкі *Generation.BY* і беларускай плятформы грамадзянскай журналістыкі *iBelarus.net*.

Мы запрашаем вас прайсьці па нашых сьлядах праз гарады, вёскі і балоты Беларусі: даведацца аб тым, што адбываецца па той бок усходняй мяжы Эўрапейскага Зьвязу (калі вы жывеце ўнутры гэтай узважна новай палітычнай прасторы, якая мае схільнасьць разглядаць сябе як «Эўропу» як такую), альбо на хвілю зьмяніць пункт гледжаньня і паглядзець на вашу родную краіну чужымі і знаёмымі вачыма нашых аўтараў (калі вы грамадзянін Беларусі), ці паглядзець, што падобнае да вашага ўласнага досьведу, а што адрозьніваецца ад яго (калі вы жывеце ў іншай частцы сьвету).

Усе прадстаўленыя тут тэксты і здымкі – плён супольнай працы маладых журналістаў, фатографаў і пісьменьнікаў зь Беларусі і некалькіх краінаў ЭЗ падчас дзесяцідзённай вандроўкі па Менску і рэгіёнах Беларусі ў жніўні 2009 года. Мы падарожнічалі па краіне зьмяшанымі групамі (кожны «эўрапейскі» ўдзельнік меў беларускага партнэра) і па дарозе прыглядаліся да пэўных аспэктаў беларускай рэчаіснасьці, якія здаваліся нам вартымі ўвагі і важнымі.

Ці сапраўды выгнаньне можа быць спадчынным? Ці добрая ідэя –ператварыць Менск у музэй савецкай архітэктуры? Што засталося ад вялізнай сыстэмы балотаў – якія калісьці займалі траціну тэрыторыі Беларусі – пасьля дзесяцігодзьдзяў мэліярацыі? Якая цана бясплатнай вышэйшай адукацыі? Ці памірае беларуская вёска, ці яе вяртаюць да жыцьця маладыя сем'і, якія пераяжджаюць у нядаўна заснаваныя эка-вёскі? Як сёньня жывецца ў Беларусі жанчынам на пэнсіі? Хто тыя маладыя, добра адукаваныя грамадзкія і культурныя актывісты, якія фармуюць сёньняшняе аблічча гэтай пост-савецкай краіны – у рамках палітычных абмежаваньняў, па-за імі і насуперак ім? Ці існуе сёньня беларуская ідэнтычнасьць?

На першы погляд, «усе мы больш ці менш аднолькавыя». Усе мы маладыя, адукаваныя, актыўныя грамадзяне сучаснага глябалізаванага сьвету, прывычныя як да падарожжаў, так і да віртуальнай прасторы і магчымасьцяў, якія яна дае. Здаецца, мы маем агульны пункт гледжаньня. І ўсё ж, нягледзячы на нашыя электронныя скрыні, скайпы ды фэйсбукі, нашыя ай-фоны і mp3, у пэўныя моманты мы можам сутыкацца з тым фактам, што нашыя ідэнтычнасьці фармаваліся на падставе рознага досьведу, з усьведамленьнем таго, што нашыя ўспаміны, меркаваньні і прыхільнасьці раз-пораз аддзяляюць нас адно ад аднаго – «беларусаў» ад «грамадзян ЭЗ», «былых усходнеэўрапейцаў» ад «былых заходнеэўрапейцаў», старэйшае пакаленьне ад маладзейшага – лініі падзелу рухомыя, накладаньні магчымыя. Таму пункты гледжаньня на нашу агульную тэму шматстайныя. Нашыя рэфлексіі адлюстроўваюць думкі і меркаваньні іх аўтараў. У тэкстах і фотаздымках могуць адбівацца асабістыя спадзяваньні, прадузятыя меркаваньні і стэрэатыпы, і тое невялікае адрозьненьне, зь якім мы часам сутыкаліся, працуючы разам, таксама заўважнае ў тэкстах і фотаздымках, што надае ім асаблівую каштоўнасьць, робячы іх чымсьці большым, чым проста аповедамі пра экзатычную, невядомую Беларусь.

З увагі на тое, што беларуская мова сёньня адыгрывае выбітную ролю ў палітычным і асабістым самавызначэньні беларусаў, спачатку мы меркавалі надрукаваць усе матэрыялы на дзьвюх мовах – беларускай і ангійскай, але, на вялікі жаль, фінансавыя абмежаваньні, зь якімі сутыкаюцца некамэрцыйныя праекты накшталт нашага падчас цяжкага фінансавага крызісу, прымусілі нас спыніцца на той форме, якую выданьне мае сёньня. Такім чынам, у гэтым друкаваным выданьні вы знойдзеце поўныя вэрсіі ўсіх тэкстаў па-ангійску – але тыя, хто валодае беларускай мовай, могуць прачытаць поўныя беларускія вэрсіі ў Інтэрнэце. Апроч таго, на сайце www.bio.generation.by вы знойдзеце дадатковыя аўдыё-візуальныя матэрыялы.

Belarus Inside Out спадзяецца прадставіць вам факты і аповеды пра некаторыя ня надта «тыповыя» аспэкты жыцьця ў сёньняшняй Беларусі.

Магчыма, выправіўшыся сьледам за намі ў гэтую вандроўку, вы ўбачыце, што шлях, якім вы ідзеце, знаёмячыся зь невядомым, вядзе вас на ўласны падворак...

Kathrin Janka   Катрын Янка
Editorial Board Berlin   рэдакцыйная калегія Бэрлін

CONTENT

THE MOST EXPENSIVE «FREE EDUCATION»
САМАЯ ДАРАГАЯ «БЯСПЛАТНАЯ АДУКАЦЫЯ»

Work Placements May Tie Graduates Up
in Undesired Places for Years

by **Sinziana Demian, CLUJ-NAPOCA**

I am old enough to remember the endless informal pre-1989 debates back home, in Romania, about the obligatory work placements that young people had to take following university graduation. This well-entrenched Soviet-style system, adopted in most countries east of the Iron Curtain, was to ensure that even the most remote, underdeveloped regions would get qualified – though not necessarily experienced – professionals in every field. Recently graduated medical doctors, teachers and engineers were among the most coveted young men and women, who, despite their wishes or hopes, were often sent out to isolated, derelict areas to fulfill several years of state-imposed work assignments.

I am young enough, though, to have never been part of this system. Romania, alongside all its neighbors, gradually did away with this practice in the early 1990s. I was to find it again almost 20 years later, a few hundred kilometers north, in Belarus – the only country in Europe today to still hold a tight grip on the fate of young graduates who receive a «free education» from the state. Abolished for a brief period following independence in 1991, the system was reintroduced here twelve years ago, and it now boasts a perfect distribution of «young specialists» around the country.

For those concerned, there is little-to-no freedom of choice to speak of: «the commission», whose members come from the Ministry of Education and the university in question, tells graduates exactly where they have to go for the pre-determined period of two years. And whilst everyone would prefer to stay and get experience in big cities, the majority are instead sent to rural areas, oftentimes far away from their places of origin. Should they refuse to go, they will have to pay back the entire cost of the «free education» the state offered them. According to estimates, this could be anywhere between US$ 10,000 and US$ 15,000 for the five or six year obligatory course of studies – a sum that not many would find easy to come by in a country where average monthly salaries barely reach a few hundred US dollars.

It is a beautiful afternoon in the capital's tiny old town, and I am meeting 24-year-old Nataša* on the terrace of a posh café. With perfect make-up, clothes, accessories and demeanor, she strikes me as a real big city girl. So much so, that it's quite hard to imagine her in a small town's policlinic on some tedious dentistry work placement. And indeed, she went to great lengths to avoid the verdict of «the commission», which was about to send her to Uzda, about 100 kilometers south of Miensk.

Born, raised and educated in the capital, Nataša never imagined living anywhere else in Belarus. With her own apartment in Miensk, she shrugged at the idea of having to move into a dorm in Uzda, as it had been pre-established in the contract she would have had to sign. Three roommates and ten people sharing a kitchen and bathroom was just unthinkable.

«And so I started scrambling for a solution to get out of this», Nataša says. «I had three months to find a man

who works in the military in Miensk and convince him to marry me, so I could stay here.» This was pretty much the only category on the narrow list of exceptions allowed by the state where she could have tried to fit in. A special article of the work placement law stipulates that graduates can stay in their place of origin if they are married to someone in the military based there (or, for that matter, if their partner is disabled, or if they are pregnant or have children under the age of three).

After screening five potential candidates, who all required too much money or actually living together, Nataša recalls her first meeting with a nice, 29-year-old officer, who struck her as the perfect match. «I would have been his first wife, which means that he wasn't one of those serial marriage-buying types that have emerged lately in Miensk», Nataša explains. «Plus, he wanted to get out of it soon after bailing me out, which is exactly what I also hoped for.»

To seal the deal she offered US$ 800, 200 dollars more than the average price customary for such a transaction. They met in a restaurant, where she presented him a thick envelope with cash. «He looked at it and then decided to give me 100 dollars back, to my big surprise», she recalls. «He said he really liked me...»

Next came the ordeal of pulling strings in order to get an appointment for the civil marriage in due time. With everything finally in order, Nataša donned a short dress and showed up for the big day. It was March 3, 2008, and there she stood alongside her future husband and a witness – her father.

«When they played Mendelssohn's march it all of a sudden became real», she says. «I was relieved for myself but sad about seeing my father sad in turn. It's not exactly the way he dreamed of his daughter's wedding. We didn't even have rings.»

With the precious marriage certificate in hand, Nataša spent the next few weeks running between state offices to prove her new status and hence her claim to stay in Miensk. In order to get a new work placement, she had to clear the Health Commission as well, where she recalls long corridors overcrowded with disabled or pregnant people, who all wanted to stay in Miensk. In a one-minute encounter she was informed about her new obligatory assignment: Children's Hospital #4, where she would be staying for three years, including the one-year internship required of all graduates of medical and dentistry schools.

As for her marriage – by now it is almost divorce time, as the safe period of a year-and-a-half, when she could have been double-checked, is over. Just to make sure she was out of the danger of the «Uzda zone», she went one step further and purchased a fake document, stating that she was also pregnant. Now covered from all sides, she can finally relax: no one will remove her from Miensk anymore.

Nataša's story, although striking for an outsider, seems to no longer be exceptional in Belarus. Buying marriages with officers based in big cities has become a preferred practice of young graduates looking to escape the burden of unsuitable work placements. In Nataša's study group of eight, six people managed to get fake weddings in order to avoid relocation. In total, out of a class of 110, about 40 people employed various tricky means and eventually stayed in Miensk, even if officially only five available work places had been announced here in the beginning.

While future doctors and dentists have the least freedom of movement after graduation, given the precise places where they can actually work, students of other schools, such as languages, history or music, have more space to be inventive about dodging the system. Ihar*, a 21-year-old student of History, has already begun pulling strings: he wants to transfer from his daily full-time classes of «free education» to part-time studies, which, upon graduation, would enable him to avoid the obligatory work placement. Vital*, who studies Russian and English, intends to transfer from one university to another in the next couple of years, and then back again, which, he hopes, will make his paper trail too murky and

therefore «undesirable» for «the commission». Kacia*, a 22-year-old Math student and an activist with the opposition, prefers to be expelled and then enroll again and pay for her last year, which would also save her from the work placement.

The safest overall seem to be Computer Science graduates, whose skills are always needed in the big companies of the big cities. 26-year-old programmer Aleks Ramanienka tells me how he and the overwhelming majority of his classmates managed to stay in Miensk and get placed in companies they had already worked for as students. The process is rather straightforward and involves a simple letter that the company will send to «the commission», asking for a certain student. The only downsides: the inability to move away for two years and the fixed income.

«This is quite a stupid system», Aleks complains. «In six months we would get enough experience to deserve a better salary, but the companies will not increase our paychecks for the whole two years. I'd get US$ 500 a month, which may be good for Miensk, but it's certainly not good for a programmer.»

As lawyer Vola Bandavavičene explains, young people can secure work placements even before they enter university, if they manage to get prospective employers to support their applications. A company, for example, can issue a letter saying it will take on graduate X as an accountant in five years' time, and so the deal is done from the outset. Afterwards, the young specialists will be bound to the respective organizations for the two compulsory years. They cannot change their minds or apply for other work placements unless they receive approval from the head of the original organization.

«The trick, of course, is to get in touch with such an employer in due time», says Bandavavičene. «It's actually all about personal connections. They are much more important than school performance or any other criteria.»

At the other end of the spectrum, for the least lucky graduates who receive random placements, the road to «exile», as it is sometimes referred to, may have dramatic connotations. And surely enough, topping the most unwanted destination list is the vast Čarnobyl area, spreading along the southern border with Ukraine and up almost a third of Belarus. It is here, in the land of endless pine forests and seemingly clean, fertile fields, that I will be spending a good few days, in search of young specialists dispatched from big cities after graduation.

On a dramatically zoomed in Google map, Jelsk appears as a tiny dot in the middle of no man's land. It is a small town of 10,000 in the Homiel Oblast, the province that took the largest radiation fallout after the Čarnobyl explosion. Jelsk dutifully reminds locals and unlikely tourists of its troubled history, with a two-in-one monument in a square downtown. A white statue of a grieving woman seems to shed tears for the victims of both of the two grand atrocities which hit this unfortunate place and whose names are engraved in red letters on somber, black marble stones: The Great Patriotic War and Čarnobyl. Another plaque in the ensemble lists the eight surrounding villages which were erased from the face of the earth in the 1990s, as tremendous levels of radioactivity made life there too hazardous. Not far away from the memorial complex, in the quiet cemetery, the gravestones startle me: dozens of portraits sketched on dark backgrounds tell of past lives, so many of which have ended way too early since the fateful year of 1986.

It is with this solemn mood that I begin to register, early on a Friday morning, what Jelsk actually is today. A beautiful blue wooden church stands almost opposite a mighty statue of Lenin and a couple of old stores behind barred windows. For the rest – small houses on one side and some low rise, decrepit apartment buildings on the other. Clearly, not the most desirable or by any means joyful place in Belarus to have to live in.

It is here that 23-year-old Uładzimir*, a native of Homiel and a graduate of Miensk, was sent off on his two-year work placement. He was stunned to get the news earlier this year during his dentistry internship in Homiel, where he was just about 100 percent sure he'd get to stay forever.

«I had to take out a map and look for Jelsk. I hadn't even heard of this godforsaken place before», he explains, with mixed anger and disappointment. «There's absolutely NOTHING to do here. I will most likely live my life between hospital shifts and web surfing, just to try and fight off depression», he says.

Apart from the location itself, Uładzimir has other things to complain about. One is the low salary that he's stuck with – about US$ 300 a month –, compared to the «big money» he could be making in Homiel. Another is his personal health that he feels might be seriously harmed in this area, despite repeated official announcements that the entire region is currently «clean». Before coming to Jelsk, a mere two weeks ago, he underwent complete radiation level tests and his score was an encouraging zero, but he is highly skeptical about whether this will still be the case in a year's time.

Nevertheless, he is trying hard to look for the upsides: the hospital has good equipment and materials, because large sums have been invested here, just like in other severely radiated towns over the last few years. Moreover, he lives in a state-of-the-art 1-bedroom apartment provided for free by the authorities. The showcase unveiling of the brand new building, dedicated exclusively to young specialists, received national coverage earlier this summer.

Still, for Uładzimir, anything outside his apartment becomes an issue. As he does not have a driving license, visiting his family in Homiel, some 175 kilometers away, is an ordeal in itself, starting with a 40 minute hike to the railway station. He hasn't even started to contemplate how difficult it will be to meet up with his girlfriend, who is a student in far-away Miensk.

For now, the hospital personnel and the locals are all curious about the new, handsome dentist, and the hospital director has already offered him the position permanently. It's an offer that it is highly unlikely he will want to accept, as he confesses he'll be out of here the first minute he can. Not only does he feel a prisoner for now, but he thinks his skills are also a bad fit here:

«My way of treating people is too complicated and too expensive for this place», he argues. «Dentists doing elaborate procedures should only work in big cities, while here they should just have full-time local doctors, performing small-scale interventions», he added, all his frustration spilling out.

Just like Uładzimir, most young specialists I meet across the Čarnobyl region complain about the toll work placements take on them, both professionally and personally. They argue that it's not fair to send people here indiscriminately, and that «the commission» should tailor assignments first and foremost considering two criteria: performance in school and places of origin. Vola, a 25-year-old doctor from Łuniniec, a small town near Pinsk, points out how work placements should include much more flexibility and consistency than they do at the moment, when they are basically «slowing down careers»: instead of having the chance to pursue further education or get real experience in their desired specialties, young graduates are limited to performing basic, routine tasks. With this in mind, I ponder on the very name they are known by: «young specialists» seems almost too ironic to be true.

In the general climate of negativity, I have yet to come across someone who speaks for the system. Eventually I meet 29-year-old Taciana Kachovič, who sees work placements as a good safety net. With a degree in Belarusian and Polish Philology, which was highly valued at the time she entered Miensk State Pedagogical University, Taciana realized upon graduation that there was very little she could actually do. In the meantime, the number of Belarusian classes had been severely cut in schools, and so graduates had no chance to practice their profession.

«Here's where the state came in and helped», she explains. «They assigned me English and Russian classes instead. I admit I was shocked, but at least I had a job.»

The place she was sent to was Lachva village, some 30 kilometers away from Łuniniec. She received no reason for this decision; neither did more than half of her classmates – about 18 people – who were all sent away both from Miensk and their places of origin to teach mostly subjects other than the ones they had a degree in.

Although she had to pick up her life from scratch in a completely unexpected way, Taciana never complained. «After all, work placements are not so bad for specialties such as mine», she says. «What would have I done otherwise?»

Acutely aware of her limitations in English, Taciana excuses herself: she only had to teach this language in primary school, so she didn't really have to be that good at it after all. Now on maternity leave, she is doubtful about her professional future: she would love to teach Belarusian in high school, for which she is fully qualified, but the demand for her skills keeps going down at the moment. Luckily her husband, whom she met during her time in Lachva, now works in Russia. And, at least for the time being, they can survive on his income alone. Otherwise, her hopes are pinned on the system to get her out of trouble yet again and offer her a position as a teacher of something in the years to come.

Officially, the work placement system is deemed such a success story of state-controlled policies that it may even get a boost soon. A new draft law is looking to increase the duration of the assignments from two to five years in certain sectors, such as military, medicine and agriculture. This is doubtfully something many graduates will appreciate, as the reality on the ground shows widespread disapproval of the system even as it stands now.

And what better way to illustrate their chagrin than to take a look at the Čarnobyl area: according to estimates, only 27 percent of the people dispatched here in the last few years stayed beyond their compulsory assignments. The rest have tried their best to return to big cities and safer regions, leaving behind rural areas and small towns engulfed in the same problems and perennial need of real specialists as ever before.

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the people.

Мне дастаткова гадоў, каб памятаць, як людзі на маёй радзіме ў Румыніі яшчэ да 1989 года абмяркоўвалі паміж сабой сыстэму прымусовага разьмеркаваньня выпускнікоў унівэрсытэтаў. Савецкая сыстэма, што моцна ўкаранілася на ўсход ад жалезнай заслоны, мела на мэце забясьпечыць нават самыя аддаленыя і неразьвітыя раёны адукаванымі спэцыялістамі ў розных сфэрах, хаця б недасьведчанымі. Адразу па заканчэньні адукацыі маладых дактароў, настаўнікаў і інжынэраў, якія былі найбольш запатрабаванымі, не зважаючы на іх уласныя жаданьні і пляны адсылалі ў ізаляваныя і неразьвітыя рэгіёны, каб яны адпрацавалі некалькі гадоў на навязаных дзяржавай пасадах.

Зь іншага боку, я дастаткова маладая, і мне ўдалося пазьбегнуць гэтага лёсу. Румынія разам з усімі суседнімі краінамі паступова адмовілася ад гэтай практыкі яшчэ на пачатку 1990-х. І вось амаль праз 20 гадоў я даведваюся, што за некалькі сотняў кілямэтраў на поўнач, у Беларусі, усё яшчэ дзейнічае сыстэма, якая моцна трымае ў кулаку будучыню выпускнікоў «бясплатнай» формы навучаньня. У 1991 годзе прымусовае разьмеркаваньне было скасаванае, аднак 12 гадоў таму гэтую практыку аднавілі, і цяпер дзяржава выхваляецца ідэальным разьмеркаваньнем «маладых спэцыялістаў» па ўсёй краіне…





UNTYING THE KNOT
ЗАГАДКІ ТРАДЫЦЫІ

Wedding Traditions Can Say a Lot About a Society's Values and Aspirations. In Belarus, They Raise More Questions Than They Answer

text by **Rose Griffin, LONDON**
photo by **Anika Büssemeier, BERLIN**

CHAMPAGNE AT THE ISLE OF TEARS

Late August in central Miensk and it's the height of the wedding season. All over the city, a steady stream of newlyweds is lining up at the most famous landmarks the capital has to offer. Girls who look straight out of high school queue up in dresses which reflect a wide variety of fashion sensibilities, from the typical white meringue to more daring styles. A bride in a tiered pale green gown is closely followed by another in a thigh-skimming, corseted red and white dress and a girl who could have been the inspiration for a Disney princess. Their partners have, on the whole, gone for pale suits and pointy-toed shoes in complimentary shades. Their ties and button-holes match their bride's dresses.

Accompanied by bridesmaids, rowdy guests and champagne, the newlyweds are waiting to have their wedding photographs taken. There is an appreciable lack of pushiness. Couples wait patiently for others to finish their shots. After striking the same poses as their predecessor, they move on to other hotspots around the city popular with newlyweds. Keen to take enough shots to create an impressive album to show off later, the couples and their retinue travel around the capital, larking around and making their way through some early bottles of champagne. After such a tour, they will have a sizeable section of these «landmark pics» in their wedding albums. Given the similarities in couples' choices of pose and location, the finished albums must look remarkably similar.

I pause at one of the busiest spots – the Isle of Tears. An island in a bend of the river Śvisław, it is dominated by a memorial commemorating Belarusian soldiers killed in the Soviet Union's 9-year Afghanistan campaign. The brain child of families of fallen soldiers, work began on the monument in 1988, when the conflict was still ongoing. It was eventually officially opened by President Łukašenka in 1996. The winning design, by sculptor Jury Paŭłaŭ, doesn't pull any punches. A chapel forms the centerpiece of the memorial. Surrounded by figures of grieving female relatives, it features four altars, inscribed with the names of the 771 Belarusian soldiers killed in the conflict. An angel stands opposite, which in the warmer months sheds tears for the fallen men.

CONFLICTING IMAGES

Observing the newlyweds posing, I'm struck by this practice, by what are, to me, very conflicting images. The wedding couples are happy and confident, having chosen the clothes and accessories they want, and are excited about the image they will portray in their wedding albums. The memorial they chose for their photo shoot, on the other hand is steeped in the ideas of a different era. Commemorating men who died fighting for a country that no longer exists, even the quasi-religious features of the monument reflect communist architectural trends.

I watch as brides approach the crying angel and rub his genitalia, which is said to guarantee that they will conceive children. They are smiling and look as though the only thought in their mind is enjoying their big day and looking forward to future happiness.

Even if people do not consciously think about what the memorial represents, it is to me as an outsider, simply quite a sad place to be. My experience of war memorials back home in Great Britain is that they are rather overlooked. Attended perhaps once a year, if at all, we see them as somewhere to visit to pay our respects, normally in a somber manner. Coming from this background, it is amazing for me to see this site playing an integral part in the aesthetics of a major rite of passage, one which the average woman in Belarus will celebrate at the age of 22, and the average man at 24.

Sitting by the monument I quiz brides and other guests about why they'd chosen to come here. For most it is a question of tradition. Anna, a bubbly blonde trying to keep up with her husband's inventive posing, tells me «We didn't give it much thought. This is just one of the places you go to take pictures on your wedding day.»

Most of her fellow brides responded in a similar way to Anna, with some emphasising that it's one of the most beautiful parts of the city and makes a great location for a photo shoot. I listened in vain for any reference to what the monument represents to them in their answers.

Yet, perhaps where I see a juxtaposition of conflicting ideas, the couples I met see different elements feeding into a coherent whole, with each individual element playing a role in their perception of what constitutes Belarusian tradition and identity. I don't see this as an empty formalism. While ideas and practices associated with different periods may seem incompatible, they have still left their mark on the collective consciousness.

ASKING THE PROS

To find out more I decide to ask the professionals. After a quick glance at a Belarusian wedding portal and a few phone calls, two Miensk-based wedding planners agree to meet me to discuss trends, tradition and a few tricks of the trade. The first thing that strikes me about them is that they are both men. Charismatic and engaging, they want to meet in the park, and as we walk around enjoying the summer sun, I learn a bit about the importance of having a master of ceremonies at a Belarusian wedding.

First up is Jauhien Šumanski. Slick and organised, he comes across as the man to talk to if you want to impress your guests with extravagant entertainment and a meal with that little something extra.

«The most popular places to take photographs in Miensk are Trajeckaje Pradmieście, Mienskaje mora and the opera and ballet theater», Šumanski explains, adding: «Depending on the photographer and the couple, they may then also take pictures in various parks around the city, and in other beautiful locations.»

This list is familiar and represents a range of what Miensk has to offer. Trajeckaje Pradmieście is the part of the city that wasn't destroyed in World War II, Mienskaje mora is an artificial reservoir with a beach just outside Miensk. The opera and ballet theater is one of the more beautiful buildings in the city, particularly in the summer when the fountains are working. The only thing these sites – along with the Afghanistan War Memorial – have in common seems to be their aesthetic appeal.

Šumanski agrees with my idea that couples don't choose the locations for their symbolism. «My personal opinion is, for example, that most people don't know what the Isle of Tears stands for», he says, adding that he even doubts whether someone who served in the conflict in Afghanistan would go there on their wedding day.

Leaving Šumanski to continue organising his trademark dramatic light displays and exotic feasts, I go to meet another wedding planner, Valer Maciŭškoŭ. Walking down Miensk's main thoroughfare, he and his wife and business partner, Ala, take me past the central registry office and we pause to chat in a small square off Independence Square. They agree that the Soviet past is not at the forefront of newlyweds' minds in 2009. «It's just a tradition, young people don't think about what it represents, they just go and lay their flowers there, like they've seen other couples doing», Valer explains.

«It's not that the younger generation doesn't know what happened before 1991, but they learnt about it in history class, not through personal experience. So, this period is just not that interesting to them», sums up Valer.

BACK TO THE VILLAGE

Not everyone is happy to stick to the same formula, however. Jula and Alaksiej got married two years ago. They organized their own wedding, which lasted two days – day one taking in the registry office, church and an evening meal with friends and family, and day two spent in the village of Stročycy, 18 km from Miensk. Just a week before their second anniversary, Alaksiej and Jula are friendly and eloquent. Alaksiej seems particularly energetic and keen to explain how he perceives and interacts with concepts of Belarusian culture.

«In the last century, Belarus changed from an agricultural to an industrial country, and so traditions also changed. I think that is normal, and happened in other countries as well, but maybe other countries experienced this change in the nineteenth century», he explains, adding that alongside this process of change many people switched from using the Belarusian language to Russian, and left behind the customs and traditions of village life.

One area of life where these traditions were slowly replaced was marriage celebrations. «In villages, weddings traditionally lasted days, sometimes as long as a week. It was the union of two different families, so they needed time to get to know each other.»

He sees changing attitudes to community life as fundamentally important in how people plan their weddings. «I understand why weddings were so long in the past, there was a sense of community. Now people often don't even know the names of their neighbors in apartment blocks, so it's very difficult. A lot changed in the wake of World War II, and I think now there is no need to invite all your distant relatives.»

Today the logistics of a week-long village wedding are difficult. Many couples of marriageable age no longer live in villages themselves, and their relatives tend to be from a wider geographical area. These factors, along with financial and time constraints make these weddings relatively rare.

I ask Alaksiej if weddings like the one he and Jula organised, which aim to fit aspects of a traditional village wedding in to the constraints of modern life are common.

«Maybe it's just amongst our friends, but it has become a bit of a trend. Last year our friends had their entire wedding in Stročycy. They didn't have a church ceremony, they just went to the registry office then the village. Two weeks ago our friends also had a similar celebration in this place.»

We speak about the custom of taking photographs around the city, specifically referring to the Afghanistan memorial. Jula and Alaksiej acknowledge the tradition, but explain that it wasn't important to them to follow it. «No, we didn't go to monuments and have our pictures taken», Alaksiej tells me, «this is just a tradition from the last sixty years, this is just a Soviet tradition».

I describe my impressions from the previous few days, explaining how I found the combination of ideas represented by different locations very interesting. Alaksiej points out that the idea of tradition in Belarus is flexible. Although certain elements are common to the vast majority of Belarusian weddings, there is room for improvement, innovation and keeping up with the Joneses.

«I think if there are no traditions at all, people invent them. If it became less popular to go to monuments on your wedding day, it would become popular to go to other places.» To illustrate the point, Alaksiej describes his shock when he came across couples having their wedding photographs taken in the underground shopping center on Independence Square.

«Maybe one year ago, many people came to this center on their wedding day. I think traditions can change.» Jula suggests that maybe the cold drove people underground, but Alaksiej is adamant he saw couples down there in spring and summer as well. «I don't think I've seen any couples this year, but last year when I saw them, it struck me as very strange.»

Tradition is a concept which is mentioned frequently as a driver behind couples' wedding day decisions. I leave with the impression that, while this is not unique to Belarus, the fractured concept of what constitutes tradition in Belarus is.



Канец жніўня ў цэнтры Менску – пік сэзону вясельляў. Па ўсім горадзе няспынная плынь маладых пар, якія шыхтуюцца ў чэргі каля найбольш папулярных славутасьцяў беларускай сталіцы. Дзяўчыны, што выглядаюць як выпускніцы школаў, стаяць у сукенках, якія адлюстроўваюць шырокую разнастайнасьць успрыманьня моды – ад тыповых паветрана-белых да больш сьмелых фасонаў. Нявеста ў сьветла-зялёнай ярусной сукні суседнічае зь іншай, у гарсэтнай чырвона-белай сукенцы, што ўзьлятае на сьцёгнах, а непадалёк стаіць дзяўчына, якой маглі б натхняцца стваральнікі дыснэеўскіх прынцэсаў. Іх партнэры збольшага аддаюць перавагу сьветлым гарнітурам і чаравікам з вострымі мыскамі адпаведных адценьняў. Гальштукі і кветкі ў пятліцах падабраныя пад колер сукенак нявестаў…



IHAR AND SIARHEI *photos p. 15 - 22 by* **Anika Büssemeier, BERLIN**




















the



ХУТЧЭЙ ГАЛЯНДКА ЦІ НЕМКА ЧЫМ БЕЛАРУСКА

MORE DUTCH OR GERMAN THAN BELARUSIAN

by **Vola Vituška, MIENSK**

This is what my friends say about my way of life. My priorities are personal development and self-actualization rather than the calm married life of a grown-up woman. I try to study more, to work, participate in international projects, travel and do sports, when most women my age already have children and spend their days in peace in the kitchen. But according to my parents, the latter is closer to how a woman ought to live.

On my 24th birthday my father told me in a low voice: «My dear daughter, I wish only one thing for you... to realize the GMS plan.» I was surprised and asked him: «What is that?» «Get Married Successfully!» he said with tears in his eyes. «This is the most important thing for you now!»

I could not but understand such a wish at all, as I was already one year behind according to a common proverb «You are 23 – go and get married!».

Getting married between 18 and 24 is a long standing tradition. Our peasant ancestors did not have time to consider a life partner for too long – hard work needed four hands in a household. As a result there was a rich wedding tradition with many ceremonies and a clear understanding of how it must be held. With this in mind, young people were preparing themselves to get married from a very young age. And more often than not, it wasn't about connecting your life with a beloved person, but rather a planned initiation into grown-up life.

In Soviet times, life was also pre-planned. Kindergarten, school, university or a vocational school, work at a plant, a state apartment, kids, their kindergarten, school... Everything was known in advance. The circle was broken only by a few people who deviated from it at around the «wedding» stage... These «deviations» came in different forms.

But it has to be emphasized that according to the official position there was no sex in the almost 100% married Soviet world.

After the «great and powerful» state crashed, sex came back to people for their happiness. It affected the traditional life system only in the way that after 20 you had to be more careful in choosing your partner. Now you could use any method possible: getting pregnant «by chance» was good enough to get married to the one you really liked. You don't have to be too picky about the means, especially when you hear from all of your close and distant family members: «Wow! You are a grown-up already! When are we going to party at your wedding?»

It might be surprising, but even mature men are comfortable thinking that way. At my age it is not rare that I hear them calling me an old spinster, either trying to joke or insult me.

When all their friends are married and have children, it affects the world view of even the most open-minded men. Being single after 30 is just as uncomfortable to men as to women, no matter how hard they claim their polygamous nature and attraction to adventures.

The small but effective influence of the societal tradition achieves its goal. Especially among young people in the country and small towns. The main life aim for

women is a successful marriage and healthy children. I don't claim that these values are wrong, but it is certainly uncomfortable to feel that the attitude towards myself is as to someone weird, that the way I live my life is «not like it should be».

When women approach 30 (this age is like a benchmark in people's minds), many of them start to lose self-respect and little by little start acting like «spinsters» and «old virgins». In other words, the worst possible thing happens – they become victims of the fear imposed on them by the society.

The dominating sound in Miensk is the sound of high heels on the pavement. The determination to get married, the family as a measure of success has formed a certain style of communication among young women. One can often witness people getting acquainted in public places and bars according to a buy-sell scenario. The elite clubs are crowded with «miniskirts and foreigners» on weekend nights: young and sexy ladies compete between themselves over how much of their body is on display, with only one aim – to attract a potential partner, and a foreign one would be even better. Most often the men who fall for such tactics are from Asian countries.

There are three percent more women in Belarus, than men. And that makes more than 300.000. It complicates the search for a partner. Add to that mass emigration and the GMS plan is even more difficult to fulfill. More and more talented men and potential husbands are going abroad to study, work and just live a better life. Therefore, sometimes when I come back from another trip I ask myself where are those active, progressive and beautiful young people of Belarus? Where are all of our cultured and intelligent young men? Why does it look like abroad there are plenty of them, but not in Belarus?

However, there are also progressive young Belarusians who live their life in a more European way.

Jula, 25, is a good-looking and successful business woman. She thinks that marriage is «one of the most responsible decisions in one's life» that is why she treats it very responsibly.

«I would like to have a good husband whom I could trust, to live my whole life with him and have three children. But at the moment I am rather easy about it: I don't do anything serious and am not considering any candidates. Sometimes I have these thoughts that it is about time for me to get married, not because I feel like a spinster, but because biologically this is the best age to give birth. And, I want to give birth to healthy children. And that is more likely when I am young.»

More and more couples in love have started living together without getting married. This is rather a new concept for us, however, it is common among young people.

Nataša, 24, and Arciom, 28, live together. Nataša had a hard time trying to explain to her father that she is going to start an independent life with a man.

«I was leaving my home with a pillow and a blanket. In the corridor I was explaining: *Daddy, I am going to live by myself*. And of course there was a scene. Of course, my parents are polite, nobody was screaming and making a scandal, but my father tried to make sure that I understood how stupid it was, what I was doing. My mom still asks me sometimes: *Aren't you bored yet?* Father tells me sometimes: *Stop being silly and come back home*. After one and a half years they are still hoping that we will realize that it is a mistake.

During our first visit together to my parents, my father did not even come into the kitchen to drink tea with us. Now he has changed a bit, greets my boyfriend with a handshake and talks to him. Still he often keeps talking only to me in a conversation, ignoring my partner quite a lot.»

«Don't live together before marriage, let that happen in other families», says Arciom. «Marriage is something obligatory and unquestionable for the older generation, which decides and explains everything. And we have another opinion: marriage registration is not a condition or guarantee for happiness. Now most people register their marriage officially for different kinds of social support and privileges. We will probably get married officially only if we decide to have a baby. Until then... we are just fine like this.»

Once a woman has acquired the honor of being married, her only responsibility becomes to take care of her man until the end of time. While women work just like men, many of them have to work another shift at home – cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing... Often the same chores but on a bigger scale are fulfilled by wives during weekends. At the same time the husband is relaxing watching TV, as he had a long week of work.

And at some point it often happens that the man leaves his family, files for divorce, goes to another woman – even after 60. It is not that common for families to stay together anymore.

However, there are also plenty of happy stories, colorful and diverse. An aunt of my friend was waiting for her husband for 30 years. Everyone wondered how a woman like her, attractive and intelligent, could be single. And as a result of her sensible approach to marriage, she is very happy with the one she eventually chose to be her husband.

My friends' grandparents met each other and fell in love when they were already around 70 years old. After that my friends – two guys – met too and realized that they should become a family.

My grandparents have recently celebrated their «golden anniversary» – 50 years of marriage.

Some people even manage to live in a same-sex relationship in the middle of a homophobic society, without the fear of «people talking».

I start thinking of spring evenings and summer nights when couples in love are strolling outside. In winter they tenderly hold each others' hands at a table in a café. In autumn they walk through fallen leaves in parks. There are enough happy couples among my friends. And my own experience is successful. Love is a permanently strong engine. It has always been like that in the world.

And our stereotypes form a natural part of life. During a wedding people collect money in a blue or a pink jar for a girl or a boy. In some sense they define a life-vector for themselves. This is normal for us. We cannot live in another way. I guess the women of Belarus will keep getting flowers and congratulations for being women on March 8th for many years to come. As long as this attitude remains deep inside us.

Так сьцьвярджаюць мае замежныя сябры, гледзячы на мой лад жыцьця. Разьвіцьцё і самарэалізацыя для мяне зараз больш прыярытэтныя за сталае замужняе жыцьцё дарослай жанчыны. Я стараюся болей вучыцца, працаваць, удзельнічаць у міжнародных праектах, вандраваць, займацца спортам, у той час як большасьць маіх аднагодак ужо мае дзяцей і спакойна гатуе мужу абед. І апошні варыянт жыцьця, згодна з уяўленьнямі маіх бацькоў, больш правільны.

На мой дваццаць чацьвёрты дзень народзінаў тата ціха, з заміраньнем голасу павіншаваў: «Дачушка, ня зычу табе нічога іншага, але толькі... ажыцьцявіць плян УВЗ». «Што гэта такое?», - зьдзіўлена перапытала я. «Удала Выйсьці Замуж», - адказаў ён, а ў вачах ледзь не стаялі сьлёзы. «Гэта для цябе зараз самае важнае!» ...

ПРАЦАВАЦЬ –ВАЖНЕЙ, ЧЫМ ЖЫЦЬ
WORKING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN LIVING

text by **Natallia Ramanenka, MIENSK**
comic by **Raissa Chikh, PARIS/KIEV**

«The cutest girls live in Belarus», boast the newspaper headlines, accompanied by pictures of another blond every day. «There are so many pretty ladies here!», exclaim foreign and local men walking through our clean cities.

We decided to go to the center of Miensk and Homiel too, but not to enjoy the sight of so many pretty ladies (let them enjoy it!). We were looking for female pensioners who are still working.

It turned out to be easier than we thought, and not because we know any special places to look. Working female pensioners are everywhere: in restaurants, parks, streets and shops, in hospitals, kindergartens, museums and public toilets. Almost every fourth person in our country is a pensioner, and every fourth pensioner is still working. Statistics say that out of 2,4 mln Belarusian pensioners, 560.000 work. Take a closer look – Who sweeps the streets? Who cleans the floor? Who sells lottery tickets whatever the weather? Pretty women, obviously! But those who are over 40...

Let's get to know them!

«Mh... Pensioners? But this is a youth magazine, I don't think they will be interested in pensioners.»

«Maybe we should make the topic a bit wider, make it about work in general, and not only about pensioners?»

«Pensioners are constantly upset about something and angry. Their pensions are so big, bigger than child support for young mothers. What more could they possibly want?»

«But most of them go crazy in their 50s and 60s. Can you imagine what would happen if crazy people continued to work as doctors or teachers?»


Belarusian legends:
Zinaida's Story
LOOK AT THIS PICTURE.
"I WAS 22 YEARS OLD, YOUNG, BEAUTIFUL. I WORKED IN A SHOP IN MIENSK."
"I LOVED MY WORK AND I WAS A GOOD SELLER."
«УДАРНИК»
"ONE MORNING OUR BOSS CALLED ALL OF US INTO HIS OFFICE..."
FIVE MINUTES--MEETING!!
WE HAVE TO SUGGEST A CANDIDATE FOR THE ELECTION OF THE TOWN SOVIET.
I WAS THINKING OF ZINA, OUR BEST SELLER.
EVERYBODY WHO AGREES PUT YOUR HAND UP!
"AND EVERYBODY VOTED AS USUAL AT THIS TIME..."

«BECAUSE I LIKE IT»

We are talking to Tamara Alaksandraŭna, an elegantly dressed woman with a quiet voice. She appears to be a pensioner who works. She is 57 years old. She is an invigilator in the biggest museum in Homiel. But she spent most of her life working in sales. She started out as a shop assistant and finished her career as an outlet manager.

It wasn't her dream to work in sales. In her childhood she wanted to become a literature or mathematics teacher, as she was a good student.

«I was not planning on selling all my life, but it just happened», she explains. Only when she started to approach pensionable age did she find a job that satisfies her soul. The outlet, where she worked as a manager, was closed. All of the staff were «asked» to quit which left them with no job or financial compensation. Tamara Alaksandraŭna was just two years too young to start drawing a pension. Finding a job at that age is very difficult.

«Would you have stayed working there if you had the chance?»

«No, I don't want to do that anymore. Times are different now, and everything is not as it used to be...»

The legal pension age was set at 55 years for women and 60 years for men in 1932. This assessment of the age at which people are no longer able to work is part of Belarus' Soviet heritage. The pension age was introduced after a study of workers who started drawing a pension because they were not able to work due to disabilities.

Much has changed since then. But the pension age is taken for granted. And naturally it causes barriers to the labor market for those over the age of 50. In your 50s it is almost impossible to change your job for a better one, older employees don't get promoted. But these problems are not openly raised – people act as though it is just the way it should be.

The percentage of pensioners is growing every year. But the government will not raise the pension age because it would not prove popular with the public.

It took Tamara Alaksandraŭna just a couple of months to find a new job. She soon found out that people were needed to work on the renovation of the Rumiancavy-Paškievičy Palace. And she has already been working there as an invigilator for five years.

«The salary is not that big here», she says. «But I work here because I like it. This is my hall and everything is protected by a security system here. In the morning we come, open the museum and switch off the security system. I take care of the exhibits to make sure that they are well kept. I also give information to visitors. I like the museum, its history, the people.»

Tamara Alaksandraŭna is fond of poetry. She reads Tsvetaeva – do we need to explain who Tsvetaeva is? I'd be inclined not to, but maybe that's just because I have heard of her. She also writes poems herself.

After our conversation, the former outlet manager showed us her poems. Then she showed us around the halls of the museum, giving us lots of information about each exhibit.

«ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE KNOWN TROUBLES CAN KNOW HAPPINESS»

Valiancina Alaksandraŭna is 73 years old. She works as a janitor in a Miensk clinic. One of her tasks is to clean the toilets of the clinic.

«What is the main reason why you work here?»

«I only work here because my daughter's income is also insufficient. We live together, so what can I do on my pension money alone? I need to pay the household bills, buy things. My daughter is still not that old, she needs to buy things to wear...»

It is not that easy in fact to find a pensioner-janitor who would eagerly share their life story with a journalist. Many disrespect this profession and are afraid that their former colleagues and friends will find out about their current occupation. Janitors in light reflecting jackets turn their faces away, hiding and trying to escape questions. Many old women look for jobs in places with


"AND THEN I FORGOT THIS CANDIDACY..."
ШКОЛ
"AND THE DAY OF THE ELECTION..."
"I DIDN'T EVEN GO TO VOTE."
Zinaida Simovna
-22 year old
-single
"AND A FEW DAYS LATER, WHEN I ARRIVED AT WORK..."
CONGRATULATIONS! YOU'RE IN THE NEWSPAPER!
NOW YOU'RE SOMEONE IMPORTANT!
"I HAD BECOME SOMEONE IMPORTANT."
CONGRATULATIONS ZINA!
NOW YOU'RE DEPUTY OF THE TOWN SOVIET.
HERE IS YOUR CARD.
THANK YOU.
"...JUST IMAGINE, THE LITTLE SHOP ASSISTANT BECAME."
Deputy of the Soviet's district.
BRAVO!
CLAP!
CLAP!
"STARTED TO GO TO MEETINGS, RECEPTIONS..."

few people, away from the center, in order not to meet someone they know. They don't want to complain, and there is nothing to be proud of as they say. Having an unprestigous job, pensioners are shy and don't want to be seen in their uniforms, to be photographed and written about. Those who had a higher status before they started drawing a pension are especially shy. Those who have higher education and achievements to their name. More than a half of the old working women whom we met refused to talk to us. Among them were street cleaners, public toilet cleaners...

Obviously, being a janitor is not Valiancina Alaksandraŭna's main speciality. She started as a postwoman in Odessa. But soon, before she graduated from the vocational college, she became the manager of the post office.

«In our family everyone is a post office employee – it's a post office dynasty. If you add together all the years our family worked there, it would be more than 100 years», she says proudly. «I am very proud of course that I got an education and became a professional. Everyone treated me with respect.»

At the end of her post office career she had more than 100 (!) people working under her supervision – connection operators, telegraphists, postmen... For her achievements at work Valiancina Alaksandraŭna was awarded a «labor veteran» medal. But when she was 53 (2 years before the legal pension age) she quit to take care of her old mother.

«I could not leave my mother alone. She could not walk, and someone had to take care of her, give her food and clean for her.»

At the age of 57 she attempts to find another job. A couple of years before the head of the main post office was sending her letters with promises to give her a whole post office department. Now, remembering those promises, her first port of call is the personnel department of the post office, only to hear «we cannot take you at this age».

«I really wanted to work... But the time had passed and I lost my chance. At 57 I could not work even as a postwoman. And I liked my job», she says thoughtfully. And then she continues: «I did not just lose the position of a manager, but also of an operator, as everything is developing and I don't know the new technology. For example, I have no clue how to use computers.»

Valiancina Alaksandraŭna's daughter works as a medical attendant. She offered her mother a job in the clinic. There, at the age of 57, a former manager became an orderly. She worked there for ten years.

«If the clinic had not closed for renovation, I would still be working there. It was not that bad over there,» she says with regret. «And here I cannot get used to the work, because I have to clean toilets. I feel humiliated...» But in the end she adds: «I am not complaining. I am not complaining about anything. I thank God that I can work at the age of 73. Only those who have known troubles can know happiness.»

Knowing what she has survived: the war, hunger – I believe her.

«IT IS MORE FUN TO GO TO WORK. I FEEL NEEDED THAT WAY»

Zinaida Ivanaŭna is 60. She is a pensioner and works as a teacher's assistant in a kindergarten for children with hearing and speaking disabilities in Miensk.

Zinaida Ivanaŭna liked her first job very much. It was her dream to become a shop assistant or to work in medicine. She was too empathetic to be a doctor. That is why she went to study in a sales vocational school.

«It was very interesting to be a shop assistant! You put different goods on the counter, offer them to customers. They ask you for advice, which one is better. Whereas for one customer the cheaper one is better, for another whatever is more expensive must be of higher quality. I spent all my time communicating with people.»

Zinaida Ivanaŭna was thanked all the time by the customers, she was a «communist labor hero». Her picture was on the wall of fame.

She brought up her two children without a husband. She became a widow 24 years ago. The staff of the shop helped her a lot back then.


"SOMETIMES, I WAS ALSO ABLE TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE..."
MS ZINA, I NEED YOUR HELP!
"AT THAT TIME, THERE WERE WAITING LISTS TO GET AN APARTMENT..."
I CAN'T SUBSCRIBE ON THE FACTORY'S WAITING LIST.
"...AND WHEN WE DIDN'T MEET THE CONDITIONS..."
THAT'S WHERE I LIVE.
"I FELT SORRY FOR HER AND I SIGNED HER IN MYSELF."
I FELT USEFUL, APPRECIATED.
NOW, EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED...
...AND NOTHING REMAINS OF ALL THAT.

37 years, one month and ten days passed like that. And when she was 55 years old she had to leave the job she liked. To honor the end of her work her colleagues gave her a present.

«Would you have liked to keep working in a shop?», I ask her. «I would have liked to, but I could not. There was no opportunity for that. The personnel department called me and said: *young people are breathing down your neck*. It was hard to quit. I loved my job, I knew my job. I even started to panic: what would I do? How would I live on the pension money alone?»

Incidentally, there is a law in Belarus to encourage raising the pension age. If a person keeps working, he or she gets a certain percentage added to the salary. But in reality, when women reach 55 and men reach 60, they are politely asked to free up the position for young people. Another law is being prepared at the moment, which will limit the amount of pension payments to those people who continue to work.

Zinaida Ivanaŭna spent only a couple of days at home before she found a job as a teacher's assistant. She has been at this job for five years already.

«Young people don't want to work at this position in a kindergarten. You have to bring children to pee and poo and clean the bowls after them, change their clothes. Most teacher's assistants are us», she means women pensioners. Then she pauses and smiles. «It is not easy to take care of small children, but it is also very interesting. I had to learn their sign language, the way the children communicate. Of course it would be nice to have a better salary, they don't pay well here.»

«Why are you working now?» I ask her my favorite question.

«We changed our flat for two smaller ones. I needed to arrange moving to the new place, renovation. All that costs money. But I have other reasons besides the money. I don't want to sit on one place, I want to move. I noticed that during the weekend when I spend my time sleeping, having rest and watching TV everything gets mixed. I start thinking that my back and my legs hurt, that I am not young any more. But during the week I wake up every morning and I know that I need to do that. I do everything fast and everything works well. I manage to do everything – to go to work, communicate with people, chat and do all my household chores. Yes, it is more fun to go to work, it is more interesting and I feel needed that way. I think you have to work while you have strength for it. But you will not always be strong enough. That is why I am a bit scared of what will happen when I am not able to go to work. How should I put it... I think to move means to live. As long as you can, you should make yourself useful and work.»

«WHY SHOULD I SIT ALONE?»

Halina Alaksandraŭna works as a leisure park attendant in Homiel. She says about her age: «A person is as old as she looks.»

All of the entertainment in the park is staffed by elderly women. This is a dream job for them, to spend the whole day outside. In winter they are on unpaid vacation and can help their children with their kids.

«Why are you working now?»

«I am here not because I need money. My husband is a truck driver, he spends a lot of time on the road. And I am always alone. And I decided: why should I be sitting at home alone? And this is why I am sitting here with you now...»

Many men feel offended that their pension age is higher than the average life expectancy of a man. But unlike women, they have the chance to stay at their job until they are 60. At the same time women, who have just crossed the line of the pension age and want to keep working, have to take low paid and unprestigious jobs. A woman's experience, qualifications and work ethic do not interest anyone after they turn 50. One of my neighbors, who gave birth when she was 40 and spent a couple of years on maternity leave, could not find a

job afterwards, as she was considered too old. Looks like the only job available at this age is as a janitor or a door keeper. Men keep moving up the career ladder when they are 50. They have a chance to get a nice job and gain higher salaries.

However, it is not the amusement park which Halina Alaksandraŭna describes as the job of her life.

«I was born to work in the textile industry. I had a chance to work there and I liked it a lot. I am happy I chose this path in my life.»

Halina Alaksandraŭna has worked in a tailoring atelier in an army unit, where she started as a tailor's assistant, then became a cutter and then a manager. Her specialization – individual tailoring of army uniforms.

«I adored my job», she says. «I have spent my life in an army unit and I like order very much. I was surrounded by cultured and intelligent people. And I enjoyed that. I was quite nervous when I lost the job I liked so much.»

After the «army trade system» was destroyed, the atelier was also closed down. When she was already on pension, Halina Alaksandraŭna was invited to work in a private atelier. She was a one-person orchestra over there. She worked as a cutter, technologist, manager and a cashier.

«I was leaving home at 8 am and coming back at 9 pm. And I was busy all the time. My husband said – *honey, why should you work so much?* So, following his advice I quit in the end. They were crying, when I was leaving.»

Yes, the state pension is not that big – just around 100 euros. But it is twice as much as child support for children under three years old. It is 1,5 – 3 times bigger than disability pension. And 1,5 higher than the minimum wage.

And for all the drawbacks, women pensioners are happy to at least have some work. They are happy to get this little money and the salary they can earn on top. And they do not discuss their working status. They do not think about the fact that their pension and salary is less than what they were earning before they became pensioners, when they were doing their favorite job, where they would have preferred to stay. The most important thing is that they still can benefit society.

«Самыя прыгожыя дзяўчыны жывуць у Беларусі,» – запэўніваюць загалоўкі газэт, з гонарам друкуючы здымак чарговай бляндынкі. «Як шмат прыгажунь!» – усклікаюць замежныя і мясцовыя мужчыны падчас прамэнаду па чыстых вуліцах нашых гарадоў.

Мы таксама выправіліся ў цэнтар Менску, а потым – Гомеля, найвялікшых гарадоў Беларусі. Але не для таго, каб любавацца на маладзіц. Няхай любуюцца намі! Мы шукалі... пэнсіянэрак, якія працуюць.

Выявілася, што знайсьці іх няма як прасьцей. Не таму, што мы ведаем нейкія спэцыяльныя месцы. Працавітыя пэнсіянэры паўсюль: у рэстаранах і парках, на вуліцах і ў крамах, у бальніцах і дзіцячых садках, у музэях і грамадзкіх прыбіральнях. У нашай краіне амаль кожны чацьвёрты – пэнсіянэр, і кожны чацьвёрты пэнсіянэр працуе. Паводле статыстыкі, з 2,4 мільёна беларускіх пэнсіянэраў працуюць каля 560 тысяч. Прыглядзецеся. Хто вуліцы мяце? Хто падлогу мые? Хто лятарэйнымі квіткамі гандлюе ў любое надвор'е? Зразумела ж, прыгожыя дзяўчаты. Толькі пастарэлі яны гадоў на сорак...



HUSH CITY
МАЎКЛІВЫ ГОРАД

text by **Jürgen Rendl, BRATISLAVA / WIEN**
photo by **Anika Büssemeier, BERLIN**

Not long ago I wanted to find out how you sound. Having soaked up a remarkable dose of sonic density, carried by the infectious rhythm of your underground lifelines, I felt tempted to encounter what's above. I turned into a flaneur, strolling around, observing.

UNIVERSE

Caviar for the common people, on bread and butter, in the vitrines of the people's drinking palace. Upstairs in the supermarket, teenage style and pop-culture aficionados were preparing for clubbing in a parallel universe.

THE SCREEN

He needs to be seen, in every public news broadcast. Again it's all about world class potatoes and the best vegetable oil. Don't you love me? I was the only one watching.

HORIZONT

I couldn't make sense of this place by walking across its vast plot of concrete, shadowed by a massive monolith, rising out of nothing. Within a glimpse I could read «Horizont» on a rooftop. I felt so lost.

LIVE FOREVER

I turned around, walked to the other side and took a rest on a bench. Young folks all around, sitting, chatting, but their voices seemed to be absorbed by this place. Soon a man came over, flashily dressed, nervously thumbing through a book in front of me – You know?

PERECHOD

Back in the passage of the metro station I felt less scattered. There it wasn't me, passing by. I could afford to pause, in the middle of the rush, not being part of it. I chose to lose myself in your lifelines again, where humming engines are drowning out the all-dominant sound of high heels.

Listen, follow me!
http://aporee.org/maps/projects/minskflaneur

Ня так даўно я вырашыў даведацца, як ты гучыш. Увабраўшы ў сябе даволі вялікую дозу шчыльнага гуку твайго андэграўнднага жыцьця, я захацеў даведацца, што там на паверхні.

I я ператварыўся ў звычайнага мінака, які шпацыруе па горадзе і назірае…

SWAMP MAN
БАЛОТНЫ ЧАЛАВЕК

Exploring the «Sun City» of Miensk
in the Footsteps of Belarusian Author Artur Klinaŭ

text and photos by **Achim Hatzius, BERLIN**

The «last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe» and an «outpost of tyranny» – that is how former U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, once called my travel destination. Tourism of the ultimate kind: The tone is set, evoking memories of my childhood and early youth, of those sixteen years of growing up in the GDR. I am thinking about what is left of it inside me – still affecting me, memories and feelings – and about what I re-encounter again and again: inside me, and apparently also in my surroundings, in the world I live in. Germany, 2009. I know almost nothing about my destination. But what I know is that I will have to take the risk to compare. To compare without equating.

My journey is both: a game and a task, where memory and reality mingle, interfere. I am staying at the surface, ambiguous. Taking possession of the signs that form my new surroundings and perceiving myself through it. I do not understand what I see or I am interpreting it wrongly. The truth that I discover may just be my own – unsound and subjective. Yet to remember where I come from and who I have become may perhaps help me to learn more about this place that I am visiting.

The photographs of Belarus that I have seen before my trip show people, landscapes, objects. The pictures reveal nothing about relations and interactions between what is shown. So this is why I leave my camera in my suitcase for most of the time. Still, my approach will stay in a photographer's mode, choosing perspectives, cutting, and staying out of focus, if necessary.

Miensk's renovated pomp and her dusty Soviet prosaicness seem like a theme park to me. A festive, pathetic entity. And yet it is a picture puzzle. Austere or amusing, decoration or message? I can sense the simultaneous presence of incompatible features. Perceiving the city as the architectonic gem of a past era, I remain accessible for the indoctrination and admonition of this all too eloquent sculptural landscape. It attracts me, I presume an intention, but what can that mean?

The Soviet Union no longer exists. And still, I have the feeling that I am not alone. That somewhere there behind the walls someone is standing, like ever before, someone, to whom I am not indifferent and whose messages are meant for me. This strange feeling is my companion as I stroll through the city and then, suddenly, the shock that this city is exactly what I am making of her.

ARTUR KLINAŬ AND THE SUN CITY OF DREAMS

Artur Klinaŭ has agreed to give me an interview. From my first day onwards, his novel *Minsk – Sun City of Dreams* has been my travel guide to the phantasma of a city of happiness, a myth that seems to me equally real



and alive as fragile and vulnerable. Klinaŭ is a resident to Miensk; he is a freelance artist and editor of the art magazine *pARTisan*. We meet in his small apartment not far from the train station.

Klinaŭ's book is something like a manual for the approach to Miensk's architectonic splendor, with whose edifices the buildings of the old city and her bourgeois culture were replaced in the early years of the Soviet empire. «The sun city, was erected on the skeleton of the old town, on old Miensk's skeleton», says Klinaŭ. His novel brings together different levels of meaning. It reflects the history of the city of Miensk, the wars, that came upon it, and the destruction and changes it has seen. It also carries the autobiographical traits of a life lived in the Soviet city of Miensk. «This is the city of my childhood, the place where I was born», Klinaŭ explains, «I was born and raised in this city, and thus it represents a value a priori to me. I want it to stay, not to die.» It is impossible not to perceive his love of his city, the city that he calls a «monument of the communist utopia at its core». And smiling, he adds: «In principle, I like the idea of communism in its original form.» On another level, Klinaŭ's idea of «sun city» is linked with the utopian draft of an ideal «sun state» by Thommaso Campanella. Such, the novel is also the confession of a desire for a place that can never exist.

To me, it seems that utopia doesn't get along with reality. On my walks it seems as if Klinaŭ's sun city has fallen from the sky some day; that she has lost her aloofness. A bit out of the center, I have been witness of an entire quarter – probably early post-war buildings – being torn to the ground to be replaced by something new.

«The wild capital has no sensations for this city», comments Klinaŭ. He himself has been building on his own vision for his sun city for the longest time, on the ruins of the communist utopia, so to say: «There are many



fragments of Soviet architecture all over the territory of the former Soviet Union. In every city you will find an ensemble, pieces and bits of that architecture, but only in Miensk this concept has been turned into the stones of an entire city, only here was an urbanity project completed as a whole.» This is what makes the city unique – as an expression and as a bearer of the myth of that very cultural epoch in which she was created. And precious for posterity: «We should give the sun city to the tourists. The only way to show the decision-makers on the governmental side that the destruction of the sun city is a disadvantage for the country and the nation is to develop an investment plan, that makes the sun city as a large scale tourist project look much more attractive than the sporadic building activity of diverse investors today.» Time, however, is running out. The interest of real-estate investors is all too big.

HIDE IN THE POTATOES – HERE COMES THE SWAMP MAN

Klinaŭ has brought alive the myth of his sun city within himself. He is his own eye-witness of how an idea has turned into reality – the reality of the imagined.

But it is not only Miensk's architecture from early Soviet times that has an ambiguous status as a cultural sign. Klinaŭ, who is presently working for the state-run film studio *Belarusfilm*, has realized that a lot of the Belarusian film productions today relate to the war. Films like *Dneprovskiy Rubezh* by Dzianis Skvarcoŭ or *V Iyune 41-go* by Alaksandar Franskievič tell stories from the time of the Great Patriotic War, they tell of events that happened in the time between the attack of German troops on the Soviet Union in 1941 and the liberation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army in 1945. «During the Soviet period, World War II was one of the domineering topics in all spheres of Belarusian culture, this lasted for a long time.» But the fact that this is still true today puzzles even Klinaŭ: «These films are completely crazy, also because they are produced without the aim of selling them. Horrendous amounts of money are being spent on these productions, and then, after a little presentation and some showings in two or three cinemas, they rest in the shelves and nobody looks at them.» There is no public for these films and it seems that they are little more than the empty and obsessive self-repetition of a bureaucratic cultural factory that is artificially being kept alive.

To me, the everlasting presence of the war gives testimony to a certain rigidness, to a certain perspective that has to be directed at the always same. Yet, maybe the focus isn't really on the concrete historical events, or on a certain obsolete interpretation of them which is reinforced again and again by each new film. Maybe the message is hidden on a different, symbolic level. Maybe at stake is the «being at war» as such?

Klinaŭ has a metaphor for this.

«The condition of being at war forms the psychological type of the man underground, the swamp man. To the swamp man, the entire world surrounding him is a hostile one. Around him war is taking place. He lives on occupied territory. The task of the swamp man is to survive in such a world. That doesn't mean that he is actively fighting, that he is taking his rifle and rushing off to the battlefield. He wouldn't act like this in public, although he sees the whole world as hostile to him. Actually, the swamp man is living a double life.»

What Klinaŭ means by that is suggested in his novel. It seems, that the permanent feeling of «being at war» is connected with a centuries-long history of war and occupation in Belarus. As if people have internalized these traumatic events deep inside so that they shape their approach to life. This imaginary, *felt war* doesn't offer them any possibility for defense. As a metaphor for life in Belarus, the swamp man is hence the depiction of an emotional state, and as such a radical one: The person that keeps moving when stuck in the swamp, just keeps sinking faster; who doesn't duck his head while on the battle field is going to be hit. If there is imminent danger, go hide in the potatoes goes a saying here. It's a matter of life and death.





The potential for identification in the narratives of the Great Patriotic War as it is staged in *Belarusfilm's* productions from the 1950s until today, dissolves in nostalgia and poses the question of identity in the post-Soviet Belarus of today. As Klinaŭ puts it:

«Throughout all layers of society, the time has come now when people realize that we are not Russians but something else. But along with the realization that we are not Russians comes a great void. This stage of history is unique and interesting because this void can be filled with all kinds of things, even with the most incredible myths.» One of those myths is that of the Soviet partisan. «Or that of the sun city», says Klinaŭ and chuckles.

A LOCAL SWAMP

Strolling through Miensk. Life on the streets, inside the shops and apartments seems to be so pragmatic, clean and neat, so silent and smooth. I am thinking of the swamp man. I don't see anyone stepping out of line.

I move over the central squares and along the main roads of the city, through backyards and parks. I walk through the de-urbanized areas of the suburbs or «sleep cities» and the enigmatic jungle of small garden settlements, behind which stretch endless industrial spaces.

Somewhere beyond the sun city I find myself at a place that is marked on no map. This has become my city, the place of my old home, its old denizens. Over there, in this block I grew up. A bit to the right, further into the settlement my grandparents live in a wooden hut, the fishing rod stands inside the garage. And there, on the other side, behind the tracks and the pitted concrete wall is the factory. People are walking their dogs in the meadows along the tracks, and the trains are moving slowly. It is late afternoon, the sun is already in the west, casting a golden light, the blocks cast their shadows on the settlement. Lacquered wood, rusty metal, apple trees, potato beds, cats. From afar a green mass, a many-voiced dog barking. Paradise.

For a moment I am allowed to stay here, then I have to leave yet again. I was dreaming.

«Апошняя дыктатура Эўропы» і «фарпост тыраніі» – так былы дзяржсакратар ЗША Кандаліза Райс аднойчы ахрысьціла мэту майго падарожжа. Экстрэмальны турызм: уводная інфармацыя абуджае ўспаміны пра шаснаццаць гадоў майго дзяцінства і юнацтва ў НДР. Я думаю пра тое, што з таго засталося ўва мне - і працягвае ўплываць на мяне, пра мае ўспаміны і пачуцьці - і пра тое, з чым я сутыкаюся зноў а зноў: у сабе і, падобна, таксама і ў сьвеце, у якім я жыву. Нямеччына, 2009. Я амаль нічога ня ведаю пра мэту майго падарожжа. Але ведаю, што мушу пайсьці на рызыку параўнаньня. Параўнаньня без атаесамленьня…

EUROPEAN AMAZONIA
ЭЎРАПЕЙСКАЯ АМАЗОНІЯ

A Journey to Paleśsie

by **Olga Jungius, BERLIN**

A STEP INTO NOWHERE

Turaŭ lies on the brink of a flood plain: a small town off the beaten track. The mid-August afternoon imparts to the main square with its socrealist two-story hotel, Univermag, the café *Pripyat*, and the small embankment a still, slow, timeless life. Storks overlook the square from the air above: there are so many of them, that Turaŭ could easily claim the name «town of storks».

Here and there blinks of provincial luxury catch the eye of a visitor – a satellite dish that crowns the renovated roof of a wooden hut, a Mercedes that overtakes a horse carriage, the newly opened – and so far only – restaurant *Budzma!* («Cheers!» or «Let us be!» in Belarusian) next to the central square.

The embankment attracts visitors: the local drinkers bask in the light of the setting sun; occasionally a lively discussion breaks out among them. Patches of sunlight are shining on the river surface, and on the empty bottles next to the bench. Spotting the newcomers, one of the lovers of strong drinks, does not want to miss the opportunity to get acquainted and communicate his sorrows. «Now in Turaŭ we have to pay for everything: Fishing requires a license, hunting requires permission! Whose pocket does all this money fill?» A complaint that is typical of a local man who lives next to a recently established wildlife reserve. A couple of harsh words addressed to the current Belarusian government.

A drinking buddy, who has been observing us from the shade of a tree, comes up with a suddenly concerned face. «Let's go» – he strikes his friend's shoulder – «you talk too much». Self censorship is stronger than the percentage of alcohol. Drink, but «Ne boltaj!» («Don't blab!»).

The barefoot kids nearby are shouting with excitement as they catch a small perch, but lacking the proper experience in taking its life away, simply smash it against the asphalt with a kids' full strength.

What else is there to see? Illuminated by the day's last light there is the archeological site with the basement of a temple – once the largest monumental building on the territory of the Western Rus'. There are three crosses carved from stone by an unknown master, which according to the legend swam against the current to Turaŭ from Kiev in the early days of Christianity. Babushkas in motley headscarves cross themselves in front of them. The locals claim that the crosses miraculously grow in size.

Yes, before becoming absorbed in itself, suspended in its timeless isolation, Turaŭ was the center of the powerful Turaŭ Princedom. Once it played an important role in international relations, once it was an important center for the consolidation of the Christian faith. Nowadays little reminds of the earlier greatness of the Princedom's capital.

Back at the central square the storks are nestling on the telegraph polls for the night.

ON THE BOTTOM OF THE BELARUSIAN SEA

Out of Turaŭ we drive out on a dam rising high above an endless carpet of greenery crossed with streams and studded with small lakes, and soon reach the bridge. The wide river underneath rolls its waters steadily through the plain towards the horizon. This is the Prypiać – the major waterway and lifeline of Paleśsie. For two-thirds of its total length it runs through the territory of southern Belarus forming a vast labyrinth-like wetland of marshes and flooded board-leaved forests. And when it overflows, it keeps it big: starting in February and staying often till June the flood at some places reaches a width of 30 kilometers. The Prypiać is rightly called the European Amazon.

Paleśsie occupies a territory of 130 000 square kilometers of lowland stretching mainly along southern Belarus and northern Ukraine, yet partly also covering the Lublin Voivodeship in Poland and the Bryansk region in Russia. This enigmatic enchanted land remains the largest swamp complex in Europe. The father of history, Herodotus, claimed that some 2500 years ago a boundless inland sea was splashing here, which in the course of the centuries shallowed to such an extent that it turned into a vast swamp. Today's wetlands of Paleśsie are thus the bottom of what is now known as the Sea of Herodotus (or – how some prefer to call it – the Belarusian Sea) – the golden bottom of a fertile land, overgrown with unique plants, full of rare birds and animals, abundant with fish. And every year, with the coming of the spring flood, it seems as if the ancient sea has returned.

Until the second part of the 20th century, the natural isolation of the Paleśsien countryside made the Palešuks – the autochthons of Paleśsie – live a lifestyle akin to that of their ancient predecessors. Small random villages with isolated farmsteads, with distances of up to five kilometers to the next neighbor, huddling on a dry rising above a mire ground can still be found in western Paleśsie, part of the Bieraście region. There was no electricity until the early 1970s, and until the end of the 20th century every May many villages – like the rather large village of Stachava in the Stolin district – disappeared under a flood of water for a couple of months – only two hills with the church and the school rose above the surface. Here was the dead end to all roads: only by boat could one reach the nearest district center, a journey which often took the whole day.

«Sonny, please, write a letter and send it by Kobryn railway to Warsaw, ask them to increase my rent – six rubles is not enough for living» – said an old man in the 1970s to a group of researchers that had walked kilometers deep into the mire until they came across his hut on a small island. «Grandpa, for more than 30 years the capital has been in Moscow» – the researchers could believe neither their eyes nor their ears. «Write to Moscow then», answered the old man.

In the Pinsk marshes people cultivate tiny pieces of dry land around their huts, which are too small to keep cattle. The locals joke that even the cows here have their own dachas: every beginning of summer animals have to be transported by boat to the larger islands where they stay till autumn for grazing. The owner regularly rows out in the flatboat to milk them.

COMBATING THE SWAMPS

The train running along the border in a western direction is half empty – in this time of vacation most of the Belarusians are eager to leave their land of non-existing seas, streaming southwards to the shores of a real one – the Black Sea. The few passengers are napping, playing cards or drinking tea from glasses in metal holders. After centuries of hardships would the inhabitants of the swamps ever share the admiration of the foreign visitor, who – standing on the hummock – stares through his binoculars across the endless mire? What did progress bring here, and how are the «achievements» of the last decades assessed today?

«We cannot wait for favors from nature. To take them from it – that is our task», the famous Soviet biologist Ivan Mičuryn once said. Quickly adopted by the Soviet government, the phrase became a slogan for grandiose nature taming projects: Altering the course of rivers, moving mountains and draining swamps for the benefits of the new collective order. The swamps were the main target of Soviet industrialization propaganda. In the 1960s, the battle against «the rotten gnat swamps, deadly slash and impassable sump» began throughout the whole of the Soviet Union.

The Latin word «melioratio» means «improvement». Since Belarus from time immemorial was the country of swamps, no wonder, that for many the coming of the Soviet order symbolized the beginning of a new age of fertile lands instead of quag, motorways instead of slush, education and healthcare instead of isolation and diseases. And for the Palešuks it was about time: For them the swamps were a source of constant danger, tuberculosis and malaria, and simple physical isolation.

The wide-front attack on Belarus' swamps unfolded in 1964, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party announced the beginning of a large-scale melioration campaign. Infrastructure was built, in place of the drained swamps grew up apartment blocks, orchards, schools and hospitals. As a result of the large scale melioration one third of the land was put into crop rotation, as large collective farms became the basis of supply provision for the whole country.

Yet, was the «melioration» really for the better? The call for winning over nature's treasures gave a strong impulse for technical and scientific development as well as hope to many people of decent living conditions. However, it caused enormous damage to the natural balance. Wind and water erosion of the drained soils, frequent, almost inextinguishable peat fires, the destruction of valuable ecosystems – this is the, by far incomplete, list of the consequences of melioration Paleśsie is facing today. Certainly the Soviet urge to drain as much as possible in the race for social emulation has echoes in today's ecological problems. And with the ecological system out of order, what will the future bring for nature, wildlife, people?

The train arrives at Pinsk – the historical and cultural capital of Paleśsie and the third largest town in the Bieraście oblast. The river Pina skirts the historical center thus protecting it from the nearby swamps. The natural isolation saved Pinsk from the serious destruction of World War II – the town is almost untouched by Soviet buildings. Only at the main square rises a giant Lenin, frozen in energetic movement. Compared to the size of the surrounding buildings the square complex is enormous, out of proportion.

Pinsk is also known as the center of melioration. Being home to the Paleśsie State University, the town hosts a number of research institutions like the Republican Unitary Design and Survey Enterprise *Polesyegiprovodhoz* – an institute that specializes in melioration and hydraulic engineering. But here, at the very heart of all the former large-scale anti-swamp activity the leading engineer for

ISO-standards, Vital Dzianisavič, waves his hands in denial: «No, no, no! No more draining. We are renewing, fixing, reconstructing the old Soviet ameliorative systems, developing new projects of water logging; working with trickle irrigation of berry fields, orchards.» Thus he is in accord with the position of Mikałaj Bambałaŭ, the head of the laboratory of biogeochemical landscapes of the Belarusian Institute of Natural Resources and Ecology. Bambałaŭ said in an interview that it was «not melioration that caused enormous damage to Paleśsie, but the misuse of drained soils». Indeed, large sums were spent on infrastructure in Soviet times, while very little was left for maintaining the newly built ameliorative systems.

When it comes to the future of the Paleśsien mires, engineer Vital Dzianisavič sees it optimistically. He laughs and comfortingly states that, of course, «worse it wouldn't be».

No, we cannot wait for favors from nature. Nature itself is waiting for favors from us.

A MAN AND HIS SWAMP

On a Pinsk public bus the friendly female voice coming from the loudspeakers touches the deepest strings of one's soul, and one automatically starts looking for pensioners and pregnant women to offer them a seat. In Miensk the voice is male, iron, almost demanding. However, no matter where you are in Belarus, there seems to be an omnipresence of a concerned teacher assigned to guide people, preserve their moral make-up, prevent them from doing wrong: pointing out how to behave, where to cross the road, from what side to pass round the bus, why not to leave the bags unattended. It is only the tone of the voice that makes the difference.

At a plastic table in a small outside café in one of a Pinsk's Krushchev era outskirts, Alaksiej Mikałajevič Dubroŭski shows us albums with his photographs. A man in his sixties, Aliaksej Nikalaevich is suntanned, sporty and energetic. One can easily imagine him riding a bicycle over roadless terrain or making his way through a wood thicket with a backpack and a camera – his regular activities before and after retirement. The steam from our hot tea in plastic cups rises over pictures of lakes in the morning mist, swans' nests, extraordinarily beautiful flowers and huts with reed roofs.

Historian, folklorist and ecologist of Paleśsie with 33 years of experience in scientific-exploratory work in the swamps, Spadar («Mister» in Belarusian) Alaksiej certainly knows more about Paleśsie than any of his contemporaries. When he is not travelling alone, he hikes with cyclists from Holland to the remotest swampy areas, shows historians from Poland the neglected parks of the former local aristocracy, and takes the few Belarusian students interested in folklore to the villages with reed roofs. An ardent critic of the Soviet system, he is trying to disclose and publicize alleged Soviet crimes against nature and individuals in southern Belarusian regions, and therefore is a constant pain in the neck of the Pinsk KGB.

Due to his sincere admiration of the beauty of nature, or maybe partly to compensate for the losses caused by his own professional activity (based on his surveys the fateful decisions on whether to drain or not to drain were made), Dubroŭski tries hard to preserve the natural wonders of his land. «Once we discovered a real lost world – the village Kudrychi in the Pinsk district – islands inhabited mostly by old people among swamps. The draining plan was already made», remembers Spadar Alaksiej. «I was in charge of questions of ecology and couldn't let another divine natural corner disappear forever. I secretly persuaded my friends from the Institute of Zoology and Botanics to announce the area as a nature reserve. In 1991, the reserve *Nizovye Jasieldy* was made which was later included as part of the nature reserve *Middle Prypiać*.

The amount of work one active person can do to preserve and promote Belarusian Paleśsie is stunning. In a thick paper cover book called *Polygon. A Diary of Paleśsie* Dubroŭski has collected his articles, published and unpublished. He, too, is the author of several films about the uniqueness of Paleśsien nature and its destruction by men, initiator of the foundation of an archeological museum, and an organizer of excursions through the historical sites of Belarus and ethnographical expeditions. «A number of ecological routes were developed based on my descriptions», he smiles proudly.

After a while, a young sporty man with his hair cut short comes over and asks for permission to look at the photo albums. He has been lonesome sipping his beer for more than an hour at the table next to ours, within arm's reach, casting an occasional glance in our direction. Unobtrusively, our new «friend» enquires several times about our interests, places of origin and further destinations, and when he leaves no one is surprised – after all this is Belarusian Amazonia where the spirits of the past can be still met in broad daylight.

Тураў месьціцца на ўскрайку абалоны Прыпяці: малы горад у баку ад вялікіх дарог. Надвячоркам у сярэдзіне жніўня галоўная плошча гораду зь яе сацрэалістычным трохпавярховым гатэлем, унівэрмагам, кавярняй «Прыпяць» і невялікай набярэжнай жыве сваім ціхім, павольным, пазачасавым жыцьцём. Зь неба плошчу аглядаюць буслы: іх так шмат, што Тураў цалкам мог бы называцца «горадам буслоў».

Сям-там вока наведніка спыняецца на знаках правінцыйнай раскошы – спадарожнікавая талерка, што вянчае абноўлены дах драўлянай хаціны, «мэрцэдэс», які абганяе конную павозку, нядаўна адчыненая – і пакуль адзіная - рэстарацыя «Будзьма!» непадалёк ад цэнтральнай плошчы…

BELARUS WARBLING
ПОШЧАК БЕЛАТУСКІ

Belarus Is a Treasure House for Rare Bird Species – and Has a Strong NGO to Protect Them

text by **Björn Jungius, BERLIN**
photos by **Siarhei Holik, MIENSK**



At 11 p.m. the floodplain is tricolored. At our feet is the pitch blackness of the mud, in some 50 meters distance a lighter shade of darkness is indicating the beginning of a strip of low vegetation, and beyond stretches the wide sky just shifting color from ultramarine to some blacker kind of blue. The sound of the wind has stayed at shore; as we are getting further out to the meadow, the slurping and sucking noise of hip high rubber wading boots being pulled out of the mud is providing the sole melody and a monotonous rhythm of its own.

No, not quite. In certain intervals a distinct *huhuhuhu huhuhu* is echoing over the plain. If one wants to believe in ghosts – now would be the time for it. This, after all, is Paleśsie: that fairytale land of never ending swamps, in which sacred stone crosses may annually grow in size, and some partisans are said to still be hiding in the flooded forests. Here are no roads, no marked trails say the poems, and the haunted swampman may hover somewhere near over the bogs he is eternally bound to.

But, alas, it is science again. The spooky noise is meant to attract birds. It is the sound recording of a snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and is produced by the magnetophone of the ornithological ringing station in Turaŭ. Once a famed town at the southern bank of the Prypiać river, Turaŭ has experienced nothing but decline over the last five centuries. However, thanks to the work of Birdlife Belarus (APB), one of the country's scarce independent NGOs, the past decade has brought back some renomee to this forgotten medieval municipality – not as a political and religious center of an empire but as a key location for admirers of nature. Turaŭ is a Mecca for anyone interested in birds.

Some fifty meters more and we have finally reached our destination. A huge net – about two meters high, some 80 meters in length – stretched over the swamp. The white light of the torch reveals something tangled. A fluffy ball of creamy brown, white and bronze from which a knitting needle is pointing to the black air. «There is one, see», exclaims Jury, member of APB and our guide on this excursion, and excitedly approaches the bird.

The sound trick worked. It is a snipe. About a blackbird in size, the long straight beak and white belly unmistakably mark the species. It is a strange sensation to see the bird in the torchlight from very close – a rare opportunity to admire this elusive little creature that birdwatchers usually observe zigzagging away skywards (a behavior which the German language lyrically calls «himmeln», literally «skying»), mostly already out of sight before one has adjusted one's binoculars. And while one marvels at



the patterns of the feathers a strong feeling of compassion settles in – being scared and helplessly trapped in a net is certainly not a splendid time spending. Serving science is a hard business.

While Jury tries to disentangle it from the net, the bird keeps completely still. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task and it requires the experienced hands of Źmicier, staff member of the ringing station, who within a couple of seconds manages to free the bird and to carefully store it in a small linen bag he is carrying around his neck. «I haven't done this in ten years», comments Jury. «Actually, I like watching birds, not catching them.»

The floodplain forests and adjoining marshlands and meadows around the Prypiać are one, if not the last, space in Europe that is still shaped by the natural flow of a river. The landscape here is governed by the moods of the water and the shift of the seasons; during the springfloods giant areas of land are temporarily submerged only to re-appear when the water vanishes again. The eternal flow and retreat of the waters shapes an enormously productive eco-system, and a habitat suitable for a multitude of rare to rarest species. For someone travelling here from Germany it is a breathtaking time travel in natural history. This is how rivers and the surrounding spaces must have looked hundreds of years ago any place in central Europe before human activity subordinated them to their needs.

It also gives an idea how people must have lived: Turaŭ is strategically located right at the outmost edge of the waterline reached by the annual springflood;

the adjoining floodplain meadows in the vicinity of the town are still used as pasture. Actually, the grazing of the animals is an important feature in protecting the land from being overgrown by scrub and bushes and thus in maintaining its unique ecological value.

The Lug (Луг – the meadow) is also the location of the ornithological station. It is a typical wooden hut, about 50 years of age – all wooden huts in Turaŭ are about that age, since the whole town was burnt in the war – half-hidden behind a man-high wooden fence with an embedded gate. Behind a garden, apple and pear trees, a fireplace with benches around and gnawed corncobs amidst the ashes. One enters the hut through the lab-



oratory. Right next to the door, accumulated on a giant wooden desk the tools of the ringing trade: measuring instruments, test tubes, feather tables, feather samples, scales, data tables etc. In a cage above sits a bullfinch – it came here with a broken wing and silently observes from a bird's perspective all the measuring taking place on the desk below him.

Pavał Pinčuk is the head of the station. His appearance slightly resembles that of an Artur Klinaŭ gone outdoors: In glasses and ponytail, army trousers, and red T-shirt he sits in the cozy kitchen among several aquariums and drinks black tea. The life-style of the three ornithologists presently at the sation is highly nocturnal: «The main aim of our station here is the ringing of waders»,

Pinčuk explains. «We set our nets from dusk to dawn, and then control them every two hours throughout the whole night. The last patrol is at 5 a.m.» The birds caught during the course of a night – like the snipe that Źmicier has brought along, the only bird trapped during this patrol – are all identified, measured and weighed, ringed and then released back into the wild.

The ornithological station opened in 1996. Since then the ornithologists gather important statistical data that helps in the assessment of population sizes and trends, as well as in the study of bird's migration routes and alterations in migration patterns. Birds with Turaŭ rings were discovered as far away as Yakutia and Gabon (sadly enough, in both cases the birds had been shot by hunters). For a landlocked country like Belarus with no access to the sea the abundance of breeding and migrating water birds as can be found on the Turaŭ meadow is extremely unusual. «The colleagues from the ringing stations at the Azov and Black Sea thought we were nuts or drunk or on drugs when they first heard about the numbers of birds we catch here. They couldn't believe it», says Pinčuk.

In 1999, Pinčuk and his team joined the international project *Waders Wetland Inland* (WWI) – a project initiated by the *German Naturschutzbund* (NABU) whose aim is to collect statistical data that may be used in the assessment of European Union plans for an enormous river regulation project. In this special case, the collected data may be useful in proving the enormous ecological importance of the Prypiać area and, thus, to counterbalance the giant infrastructure plans for a 12.000 kilometer long regulated water highway accessible for big cargo ships that, according to EU plans, is meant to connect the Baltic and the Black Sea via the rivers Odra – Wisla – Bug – Prypiać – Dnjepr.

In the mid-nineties, the participation of Belarusian environmentalists in an international project such as WWI would have been impossible. None of the western environmental NGOs had information, not to mention contacts within the country. The tremendous natural treasures of the Prypiać, and, for that matter, of another type of Paleśsie's enormously precious landscapes, the fen mires, were unknown and unstudied. If at all, there were only faint myths and rumors of their possible existence. Belarus was terra incognita – a blank spot on the map. Inside the country, on the other hand, an independent NGO dedicated to environmental protection didn't exist. And despite a high level of expertise in biology and zoology, without access to «outside sources» the importance and value of those natural crown jewels remained unnoticed and unknown to the Belarusians themselves.

The fact that all this changed is the merit of a little bird that the world believed to be almost extinct – the aquatic warbler. And, to a great extent, that of a man who helped to rediscover the large remaining aquatic warbler population of Paleśsie – the German ornithologist Martin Flade.

One of the first things to notice in Flade's large office at the Brandenburg State Office for the Environment in Eberswalde is the omnipresence of items in Belarusian language. Besides the handsome ink paintings of various birds, detailed maps of protected areas in Paleśsie are pinned to the wall, and next to his desk hangs a black and white copy of a Belarusian newspaper article. «German Finds Bird Thought to Be Extinct in Belarus», reads the headline, below a photo of a happily smiling Flade standing with rubber boots in the middle of a swampy mire. Flade himself is a tall energetic man.

«In 1990», he remembers, «I was sitting in a wooden hut in the Biebrza swamps in Eastern Poland, studying a bird called corncrake. My roommates – a German and a Polish ornithologist, one of them studying the aquatic warbler – and me grew more and more interested in what kind of landscapes and nature we might find behind the nearby border».

During an international ornithological meeting in Gdansk in 1994, he managed to establish a contact that finally led to his first expedition to Belarus. A year later, in May 1995, Flade and a handful of other German ornithologists set off into the unknown: «We didn't have the slightest idea what to expect. Sitting on the night train to Miensk we had the greatest concerns. We didn't know any of the people we were going to meet and were entertaining the stereotypical worst case scenarios: What if no one would pick us up? What if everyone was drunk? Later we learned that our Belarusian partners had similar concerns: In fact, they were even more scared than us. After all, they were organising our expedition which meant that they had to advance large sums of their money for the renting of a helicopter etc. If we wouldn't have showed up, they would have been in the worst of troubles! When we actually met on the Miensk station there was an overwhelming feeling of relief on both sides.»

It was not only the initial concerns that proved unsubstantiated – the expedition to the Prypiać turned into an overwhelming success that exceeded all expectations. The first helicopter flight over the flooded forests of the Prypiać was an unforgettable experience. In western Paleśsie, the delighted scientists also discovered large tracts of intact fen mires along the upper Prypiać and the Jasielda river, notbably the Dzikaje and Zvanec mires, the latter being the largest intact fen mire tract in Europe (whose undestroyed area covers about 150 km²). It proved that despite massive melioration and draining, about ten percent of the original mire landscapes survived in Belarus. As a comparison: In Germany only 0.1 percent of the country's former mires escaped destruction.

It was in these mires that the ornithologists found the aquatic warbler. Due to a radical specialisation to its mire habitat, this small, not even sparrow-sized bird has become exceedingly rare in Europe – so much that it claims the sad fame of being the only European songbird listed as a globally threatened species. Like all warblers rather unspectacular in appearance, it is a little brownish creature which, unlike other warblers, does have no vocation for being a mastersinger. The field guide describes its song as a «monotonous warbling without verve and changes in tempi» being somewhat comparable to that of «a sleepy sedge warbler». In Zvanec and Dzikaje the surprised scientists listened happily to the monotonous warbling of not just one or two birds – but thousands. Today it is known that more than 50% of the aquatic warbler world population is breeding in Belarus. One in three of the world's very few aquatic warblers is said to breed in the Zvanec mire.

Having come across what is probably one of the most spectacular natural discoveries within Europe in the last decade, Flade and his team dedicated themselves fully to the task of making their findings known – and of raising interest and money for the studying and protection of the discovered species and areas in Belarus. But back in Germany obstacles were waiting. Despite these sensational findings no German or internationally renowned organisation was willing to fund projects in Belarus. «Belarus was a political no-go area», says Flade. «No matter whom we contacted nobody wanted to get involved.» And who knows what would have happened if the German *Michael Otto Foundation*, whose aim is the conservation of water and wetlands, had not dared to be the first to engage. Established just two years before in 1993, its founder, Michael Otto, long-time head of the *Otto Group* is the rare case of a businessman with a social and ecological consciousness. «When we contacted Otto, he didn't hesitate but said: Let's do it guys», remembers Flade.

Otto's engagement was a door opener. Step by step other organisations followed suit. In Belarus, Flade's Belarusian partners – with some of which he had become good friends meanwhile – managed to negotiate a protection status for the most precious areas at lightning speed. Just about in time: In the Zvanec mire, for example, a huge melioration machinery was still running at the time of its «discovery». A scientific inventory of the most important areas was compiled, management plans and protection strategies developed. And, of course, the Belarusians started to thoroughly study their «newly discovered landscapes». Today, Belarus is not only a «heavyweight» among countries most relevant for European nature conversation projects. Europe's leading experts in fen mire ecology, and of course, aquatic warbler research can be found in Belarus.

Birdlife Belarus (APB) is most likely the largest of about 65 legally registered environmental organisations in Belarus. Established in 1998, with support from the British Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the organisation has today more than 2000 members organized in 12 regional branches and staff in 23 APB nature reserves. It runs more than a hundred school clubs, issues a bilingual magazine with articles in Belarusian and Russian, and is the main contact for many international NGOs active in nature conversation in Belarus today.

APB's headquarters are located in Miensk's Botanical Garden area, not far from the children's railroad – one of those educational institutions of the former Soviet Union that is still functioning in Belarus. The building in which the office is located, a pleasant 1950s edifice with a small pond, benches and willow trees in front of the entrance, is hosting the *National Center for Extracurricular Ecological Education*, another facility whose tradition is dating back to Soviet times. It is a convenient place for an NGO headquarter whose existence, however, is threatened – there are plans for the construction of a new ice hockey stadium at the site.

The overcrowded office is bustling with activity and ideas; walls, doors, cupboards and whatever else there is, are plastered with stickers and posters of birds. The director of APB is Viktar Fiančuk. Wearing grey suit trousers and a blue shirt, the smart and eloquent Fiančuk could easily pass as any bank manager. In January 2007, he participated in a startling expedition to the Senegal Delta where, for the first time ever, the aquatic warbler wintering grounds were discovered – an imminently important next step in possibly saving the species from extinction.

«We have a lot of projects going on here», Fiančuk says, «and most of them are extremely innovative approaches realised with international cooperation». At present a project has started to rewet an unbelievable area of 500.000 hectars of formerly drained mires; Since intact mires are efficient greenhouse gas reductants this approach could prove a clever move in the struggle against global warming. «To realise those projects we work very closely together with the government – especially with the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment, but also with the Ministry of Education as we design school materials for teaching in biology classes. Everything we do is 100% legal. Without such a clear cooperation it would be impossible to achieve anything. The government understands that all our work here is for the benefit of our country.»

Even though APB's proposals can count on complaisant listeners in severval minstries, opinions may differ. There are different lobbies with different interests and influence. «For conservationists in Belarus it's like it is for conservationist's anywhere: We get only what others don't need», says Fiančuk.

On a quite different level the ecologists have to face problems at what one may call their backdoor – in and around the newly established local nature reserves, such as in Turaŭ. It is the all too familiar theme of how to make the idea of conservation platable to the rural locals, that are suddenly facing restrictions imposed upon them in the name of a – to them rather abstract – idea of nature protection.

«In the eyes of the locals birdwatchers are crazy», says Paval Pinčuk. «If at all, they can more easily relate to the foreign hunting tourists. The hunters shoot, they drink, they entertain themselves with girls. They bring a lot of money. That's why we need more birdwatchers coming here. If they, too, start spending money here, people will understand that our nature is a valuable resource and that they can profit from it.»

And so, APB is doing its best. The pretty little center of Turaŭ is decorated with brand new, neatly illustrated colorful information boards. In Belaruisan language, they are communicating a sense of pride of their natural sourroundings to the locals: – «Why Are the Turaŭ Meadows Unique?» – «The Birds of the Turaŭ Meadows» and so on. In front of the central hotel stands no monumental Lenin but a small bronze monument dedicated to a bird – to *Xenus cinereus*, the Terek Sandpiper, another one of those Turaŭ «specials» that makes birdwatchers go crazy as it can normally only be found in far-way Russian taiga landscapes. But only a bit aside, at a bridge crossing over to a peninsula in the river, one of the information boards is severely damaged. A large piece has been torn out. In law-abiding Belarus, this is a rather rare act of vandalism.

Turaŭ's youngest citizens, however, are eager to learn. «We often had kids stealing eggs from the wild birds for eating», says Pinčuk. «When we explained to them, that those birds flew here to us to breed all the way from Africa, and that their dangerous and strenuous thousands of kilometers long journey would have been entirely in vain if they keep on stealing their eggs, the kids immediately understood. They don't snatch eggs anymore.» It seems that some of the awareness-raising already works.



Аб 11-ай вечара пойма трохкаляровая. Ля нашых ног – смаляная чарната гразі, за якіх 50 мэтраў трохі сьвятлейшае адценьне пазначае пачатак паласы прызёмістай расьліннасьці, а яшчэ далей шырокае неба якраз мяняе колер з ультрамарынавага на яшчэ цямнейшы сіні. Шум ветру застаўся на беразе; калі мы адыходзім далей у пойму, адзінай мэлёдыяй з уласным манатонным рытмам застаецца хлюпаньне і чмяканьне высокіх, да сьцягна, гумовых балотных ботаў, што гразнуць у багне.

Не, не зусім адзінай. Праз пэўныя прамежкі часу над нізінай рэхам гучыць выразнае гугугугу гугугу. Калі хочаш паверыць у прывіды – лепшага месца й часу не знайсьці. Урэшце, гэта Палесьсе: казачны край бясконцых балотаў, дзе сьвятыя каменныя крыжы могуць штогод бальшэць, а па багністых лясах, як кажуць, дагэтуль хаваюцца партызаны. Тут няма дарог, няма пратаптаных сьцежак, і дзесьці па-над дрыгвой, навечна да яе прывязаная, можа лунаць здань балотнага чалавека…

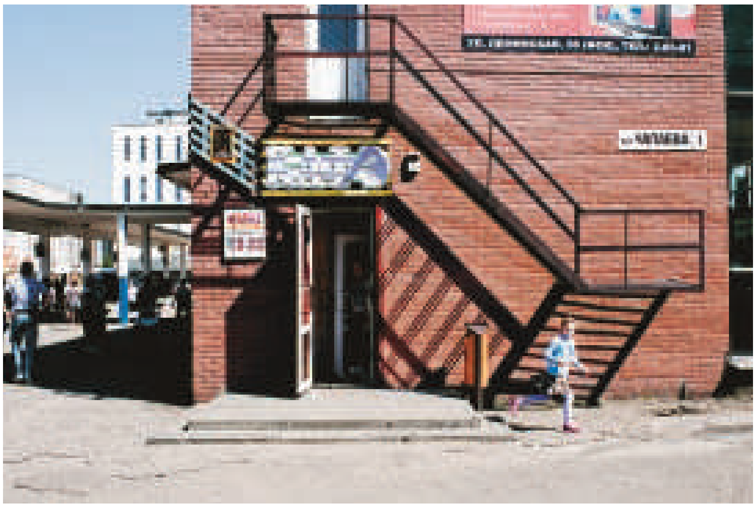


BELARUS: A FLEETING GLIMPSE *photos p. 55-59 by* **Giorgos Doganis, ATHENS**















КРАІНА ПАКІНУТЫХ ПАЛАЦАЎ
THE COUNTRY OF ABANDONED PALACES

by **Aleś Herasimenka, MIENSK**
photo by **Jura Sidun, MIENSK**

A man in uniform takes a pair of pliers from his large pocket and effortlessly bends an iron nail. The old doors, painted many times, are opening before us, and we enter a 19th century room. Among the garbage on the floor we see the remains of 200 year old tiles. There are also pieces of propaganda newspapers from Soviet times, portraits of USSR General Secretaries and accounting bills: leftovers of the former greatness and spiritual poorness of the Soviet Empire. The wind is playing in the palace of the Earls of Umiastouski, one of the most beautiful and outstanding historical buildings in Belarus. Next to the ancient fireplace a piece of an iron tube is sticking out – someone broke a part of the wall with its uniqe tiles.

THE HERITAGE OF THE EARLS UMIASTOUSKI

This is how I saw the palace of Umiastouski, which was built in the beginning of the 19th century in the village Žemysłaul. Until the 2nd World War this architectural complex and wonderful park used to belong to šlachta families (šlachta – Polish szlachta – is the term used to describe the gentry living on Belarusian and Polish territories). It then belonged to Vilnia (Vilnius) University. After Soviet control was established over this area, it was given to a kolkhoz, the local collective farm. By now the kolhoz has left the building as well, and the palace is standing abandoned, literally falling apart.

Belarusian TV channels do not get tired of showing renovated towns, which were renovated in a standard-

ized way before the national celebration of Dažynki – a harvest festival. One may even get the impression that with the bringing back of ancient city halls and churches which were destroyed during the last century, Belarus is finally reviving its historical memory, that the government is doing everything to support the development of historical and cultural values. However, historians and specialists for the protection of the cultural heritage have different opinions on that matter.

The story of the Umiastouski estate is sad, but in many ways typical for Belarus. The estate does not have any particular historical value for Belarus. At least not such value as for example Westminster for the British or Wawel for the Polish. Moreover, a similar palace, which could be an older brother of the palace in Žemysłaul, is standing in the center of Warsaw.

In front of me lies a 400-page book called *Ancient Estates of the Miensk Region*. In the book, one can find information about a hundreds of estates, which were built on the territory corresponding to the modern Miensk region, which occupies one fifth of Belarusian territory. Most of the stories about the palaces finish with the words «did not survive until modern times».

Recently some journalists, who enjoy creating rankings, compiled a list of places in Belarus entitled *The Biggest Losses of Belarusian Architectural Heritage*. It was issued to coincide with the International Day of Monuments and Sites. The most interesting aspect of this ranking was that the list was not a competitive ranking of historical sites with their names and stories, but included whole categories of what our country has lost forever. Among them are the historical centers of the two biggest cities of the country – Miensk and Horadnia; the Belarusian architectural tradition; whole layers of culture.

And all of it has been lost or is disappearing before our – the modern generation of Belarus' – very eyes. It is being destroyed because of the government's greed and «black diggers», little bureaucrats and «blind» prosecutors. It is being destroyed and replaced by massive cement blocks of houses, parkings and highways, which are much more convenient to build in the heart of 1000-year old cities.

MIENSK AS A PARKING LOT

For years, historians and architects have been pointing out the indifference of the authorities towards the fate of the historical parts of Belarusian cities. In 2009, without paying any attention to the public protest, the construction of a massive shopping mall was finished in the historical district of Miensk-Niamiha. According to the international agreements signed by Belarus, any global construction is forbidden in this area. A number of valuable old buildings were simply demolished to fit the shopping mall in here. According to the architectural historian Siarhei Chareŭ, the modern commercial real estate at Niamiha also buried the foundations of ancient construction in this area.

«Niamiha is practically lost for future generations of Miensk citizens», said the ex-director of the former Academy of Architecture, Valmen Aładaŭ, in an interview with Radio Liberty. The consequences of such an attitude towards Miensk's architecture are even more grave, given that Miensk had already lost so much of its heritage during and after World War II.

«The issue of preservation of architectural heritage is not new to Belarus», says Anton Astapovič, head of the NGO *The Belarusian Voluntary Society for Historical and Cultural Monument Preservation*. Mr Astapovič reminds me of a human rights defender, with the only difference that he is defending the right of our historical heritage to have a future.

«Belarus' neighboring countries experience similar problems. However, in Poland, for example, a private owner, who possesses an architectural monument, cannot hammer a single nail without the approval of a special committee. If he does so, he will face huge fines or a jail sentence.»

According to Mr Astapovič, Belarusian law includes a penalty for breaches in the sphere of historical heritage preservation. However, this law is not properly enforced. Therefore, it is usually very difficult to hold people who violate this condition administratively responsible. And I am not talking about criminal responsibility here, as that is practically impossible.

«One of the most recent cases was in Ivacevicki region, where the Kryžaŭździvižanskaja Church in the village of Hošava, listed as a site of historical and cultural heritage, was unlawfully renovated. As a result of the renovation, the look of the church was completely changed.»

Firstly, the wooden architecture was plastered with stucco. Then, the old wooden window frames were replaced with modern plastic ones. Onion domes in the Russian style appeared on the roof. Furthermore, one of the new domes was put where no dome had existed before. Nothing at all remained of a stylish porch with columns, which had stood at the main entrance to the church.

«The parish and the priest were punished with a fine. And now we will demand that a criminal case is opened through the district prosecution office.»

This is far from the only case, where court intervention is needed to protect buildings from the irresponsible actions of their owners – most often the Belarusian Orthodox Church or state institutions.

My conversation with Anton Astapovič is constantly interrupted by phone calls. «Prosecutors», «court expenses» – this is the vocabulary used to describe the daily life of a Belarusian NGO working in the field of architectural heritage protection. «I will send you an email with all the buildings in the Bieraście fortress. There is enough evidence to go to the prosecutor with that», says Anton Astapovič to someone on the phone.

BELARUS MUST FULFIL ITS RESPONSIBILITIES

The change of character of EU-Belarus relations has even reached the sphere of culture. Recently, a former ambassador to Poland, Pavał Łatuška, was appointed Minister of Culture. Given his predecessors, Łatuška's actions as minister look revolutionary. He recognizes the mistakes of the state and trusts independent historians. He is also the first Belarusian speaking minister to be appointed during Łukašenka's term in power. All of this raises expectations that there will be an improvement in cultural heritage preservation.

According to international law, when a historical site is listed by UNESCO as a world heritage site (and Belarus has just a few objects of that type – the palaces in Mir, Niaśviž, the forest of Biełavieskaja Pušča and Struve), then a special committee must be created to take care of the site. After Pavał Łatuška's appointment, the debate around the creation of such committees was restarted, since they did not exist until now.

«Pavał Łatuška is making standard steps, which were supposed to be taken by his predecessors», says Anton Astapovič. «The minister is just trying to accurately fulfil all the requirements of the regulations. And his approach to the problem from a legal perspective is improving his image.»

It is no surprise that the authorities have started to take better care of Belarusian sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List, as there have been cases of expulsion from it. The historical part of Dresden in Germany



has recently been removed from the UNESCO list as a result of a bridge construction across the Elbe river which severely changed the historical landscape of the city and the valley of the Elbe.

«It is much more difficult to enter the list, than to be expelled from it», remarks Mr Astapovič.

During the next couple of months, a visit from UNESCO inspectors is expected at the palace of Mir, one of the most important historical monuments in Belarus. And the inspectors might have reasons for handing in a warning for restoration rules violations. «If a warning is given, the witch hunt will start at the very top level.»

The new minister insisted that the supervisory committee for Mir includes public representatives and that the restoration violations were corrected at the expense of the construction company. «This is a sign that the process of fulfilling the responsibilities under the agreements with UNESCO has started», says Mr Astapovič.

THE PEARL OF HAUJE VALLEY

Having walked through countless rooms of the palace, I am climbing up the squeaky 150-year old stairs to the upper level, under the roof. The smell of rotten haulm and burnt plastic, which prevails in most of the rooms «conserved» with planks of plywood, is changing here with the cool of an August day. I get to the very top of the palace, the highest spot in the building and its vicinity.

Two of my companions are already standing there and anxiously looking upwards: four meters above our heads the roof is hanging off, covered with rusty cracks. It feels that tons of bricks could fall on our heads if there was the slightest breeze or sound. One by one, almost on tip toes, we carefully walk downstairs to the ground floor and speed out of the palace.

«Who knows how much longer it will survive. It may be a year or just a day», says a local construction worker.

Walking down, I catch a last glimpse of the wonderful view of this part of Belarus: the river Hauja slowly moves blue waters through the forest to neighboring Lithuania. It reminds me of the Lithuanian town Narviliški, which is five kilometers away from here. There, a Lithuanian businessman bought a similar palace, reconstructed it and turned it into his residence and a good source of income: every year on the site of the Narviliški palace *Be2gether*, a big music festival, takes place.

The Umiastouski estate was just a step away from a similar destiny. A year ago it was bought by a businessman from Miensk, who planned to reconstruct it. After investing heavily in the renovation, he planned to turn the area into an agro-tourism complex. But he did not succeed. The prosecutor's office found violations in the contract of the estate sale and it was canceled. The head of the kolkhoz, who is still responsible for the half destroyed palace, was accused of abuse of power for trying to get rid of the problematic property.

«Maybe we made a mistake in the calculation of the price for the property, but the buyer promised to save the palace from destruction and to develop agro-tourism here. Not everyone is ready to do that!», recalls Stanisłaŭ Licharad, deputy director of the department of ideology at the state institution which owns the estate at the moment. «We didn't have the money to reconstruct it anyway, and we don't have it now.»

«According to the law, an institution can not independently sell such a property», says Anton Astapovič. «What we need to do is to simplify the legal procedure of giving historical and cultural monuments to new owners.»

«We also need to develop a mechanism which would allow us to control the actions of owners in relation to the historical properties they possess. Because until now the system of penalties has not worked. Selling these objects to private owners could solve the problem to some extent, as the state does not have the money to invest in all of these sites.»

TO THE RESTAURANT FOR RESTORATION

According to Anton Astapovič, this situation is not only a result of a lack of funds and legislative practice, but also due to the simple lack of professional personnel. «There are no educational programs in the field of architectural restoration in Belarus», he explains.

«In the 1990s, we had to start from scratch again. A department of architectural restoration and conservation was opened in the Belarusian National Technical University. But there is no one to teach there.»

One of the options for saving many Belarusian palaces is the creation of special regional funds, which would direct money for the restoration of important cultural objects in Belarus. This idea has already received the support of the Ministry of Culture.

«But I believe that everything is going to be fine. Especially given the current understanding between the authorities and the public on this issue», concludes Mr Astapovič on a positive note.

UNDECLARED WAR

We return to the car tired and thoughtful. The faces of my companions reflect something close to shock. Neither of us feels like going further as we had originally planned.

«It feels as if there was a war here recently», says one of my companions. Even though it has been 65 years since war raged in the area, it is very easy to believe what she says. The administrative buildings and workshops of the Umiastouski estate were inhabited by kolkhoz workers for a long time, but even they abandoned the estate. Their former «apartments», which were formed according to the Soviet tradition of dividing big palaces into many small flats, are full of garbage now, mixed with the leftovers of their less than sophisticated way of life.

We are turning back to the dusty road which leads to recently built agro-towns – a beloved project of President Łukašenka. Their green roofs are often accompanied by red walls to fully meet an ideological ideal, reminiscent of the current national flag. I wonder if these houses will be standing for at least one tenth of the time that the gentry's palaces have survived, in spite of the ravages of time and ungrateful descendants of those who built the palaces on these lands.

As a symbol of its power, the modern Belarusian regime is building big sport arenas and public «palaces», completely forgetting about the monuments which are symbols of our past. Most of the noble historic palaces, which were full of life 100 years ago, are standing empty and abandoned. At best, their only reward for their glorious past is a dozen standard plastic windows, which substitute the old carved window frames of the 18th century, and crazy elements of decor inconceivable to former inhabitants of these estates.

Чалавек у спэцвопратцы вымае зь вялікіх кішэняў пласкагубцы і лёгка выгінае жалезны цьвік. Старыя, ня раз фарбаваныя дзьверы адчыняюцца, і перад намі паўстае пакой XIX стагодзьдзя. На закіданай сьмецьцем падлозе ляжаць аскепкі двухсотгадовай кафлі. На ёй жа валяюцца раскіданыя прапагандысцкія газэты савецкіх часоў, партрэты генсекаў і бухгальтарскія рахункі: шмацьцё былой велічы і духоўнай галечы савецкай імпэрыі…

ZALEŚSIE: THE VILLAGE OF HEREDITARY EMIGRANTS

ЗАЛЕССЕ: ВЁСКА СПАДЧЫННЫХ ЭМІГРАНТАЎ

by **Mikoła Andrejeu, MIENSK**

«I am leaving now» – The Duke couldn't cover his anxiety. «Where are you going?» – Maria seemed to stay in easy mood. – «Florence, Italy.» – «When will you return?» – «...»

THE SPIRIT OF THE PAST

«In my native country I foresaw no more opportunity to be useful in whatever I undertake», wrote Michał Ahinski, author of the c-moll #6 polonaise (later known as the *Farewell to the Motherland*) in his memoirs [1, p.60-61]. A talented composer, a maecenas, a nobility leader, an influential negotiator recognized in all the Courts of Europe, Ahinski, found no place for himself at home any more. An exhausted patriot left in distress.

That was how another influential clan dispersed, leaving the achievements and glory of its best figures to other nations. One more disappointed person, one more buried hope. The fate of the Ahinski family tree is much like the fate of Belarus: scattered about, its pieces are being gathered by occasional volunteers into one mosaic. The picture often shocks researchers by its bygone greatness.

Today, former Ahinski estates are spread around Belarus as well as some regions of modern Russia, Lithuania and Poland, repeating the map of the Great Duchy of Litva – the prototype of today's Republic of Belarus – and faintly reminiscent of its golden age of history. One of these estates is Zaleśsie – Michał Ahinski's short-lived dream, his utopia come to life, his Northern Athens.

Michał Kleafas Ahinski (1765 – 1833), known in some parts of the world as Michał Kleofas Oginski, was born into a noble family. Inspired figures, many Ahinskis were known for their devoted service to their home country. Michał Kleafas was no exception. From his early years the young duke had no need to prove his reputation. The good name of the family, his bright education and musical publications won him European fame. Despite

his splendid talents, high rank and international relations, Michał Kleafas wasted his powers in a hopeless effort. To preserve Litva's union with the Polish Rzeczpospolita, and to save it from Russian ambition. Doubtful political alliances and hope for foreign help failed to do the job. Questioning the success of Tadeusz Kosściuszko's insurrection, the duke took an active part in the revolt and suffered his first emigration period in Europe when the insurgents' troops had been defeated by the Russian army.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Michał Kleafas returned to Litva (present day Belarus) in order to exercise his succession right over the domain Zaleśsie after an amnesty for insurgents had been granted by the Russian Emperor. The village in the Vilnia region, returned from state possession, was in poor condition. The duke rushed to renovate. He mobilized famous architects and gardeners to put his house in order; at the same time he took the senator chair as the Tsar's advisor on the newly-annexed territories, i.e. Litva's part of the Rzeczpospolita. By then, he was already popular in Saint-Petersburg with his romances, mazurkas and polonaises.

«The most valuable thing for every person is the restoration of his very Motherland, where he first saw the light of life; there is no necessity to prove the nature of this feeling», stated the composer. The redesign of the homestead began in 1802. Soon, the estate became known as Northern Athens for its chic silhouette and vibrant cultural life. The neo-classical stone palace became recognizable because of its obelisk-shaped tower decorated with a clock and a globe. A «regular» Italian-style park, an English «landscape» park, a Greco-Roman chapel, a Chinese pavilion and commemorative stones for Kośsciuszko and Ralej (Michał's tutor) ensured a special spirit of comfort.

Zaleśsie was always full of elegant people. The energy of life was boiling with admirers of Ahinski's three beautiful daughters. Apart from that, theater performances, concerts, poetry readings, political discussions and charity projects chased one another. Professors of the Vilnia university, national-oriented figures and all kinds of other remarkable people visited Zaleśsie and never forgot the impression. «Northern Athens», a village with 1000 inhabitants, became a competitor to European capitals for its cultural eventfulness. During the time of Ahinski's residence hospitals, a typography, a benevolent society and a number of educational projects for peasants appeared. Polonaises were of the greatest success, reminding the nobility of the might of the lost state, the Rzeczpospolita.

«Zaleśsie is a delightful corner for us», writes Maria de Neri, former Florence courtesan, to her sister in Italy. Famous for her skills in the art of love, she become pregnant in 1804 and Michał Ahinski proposed to her.

Still, a Polish visitor noted that «the Duchess occupied a separate square tower, walls of which were covered with a mosaic of non-family pictures of generals, dukes and counts». Maria didn't make a secret of her sexual relations with «friends». Such a spirit of freedom was unheard-of, indeed.

«We are surrounded by snow and frost, but we hardly notice it. They rightfully say that happiness may be found everywhere, where the heart is delivered from repentance and is full of love.» Maria's words may sound like a false affirmation of well-being abroad – however, Ahinski's wife stayed in Zaleśsie even after her husband was forced into his second, and ultimate emigration.

The moment of truth for Michał Ahinski came with the failure of Litva's restoration attempt. Despite his connections and influence he failed to bring the idea of an independent state closer to reality. Finally, he fled abroad. The c-moll #6 polonaise *Farewell* became the hymn of Belarusian emigrants sick with patriotism.

THE BELARUSIAN TRADITION OF EMIGRATION

During the last two centuries soldiers of various foreign armies marked the ground of Zaleśsie as well as of the rest of the country. At least two nations – the Polish and the Russians – proclaimed the land as being veritably theirs, developing various theories of Belarus as «Eastern Outskirts» and «Western Russia» respectively. Vilnia, once the cultural centre of this corner of the world, after Stalin's demarcation politics act in the early communist epoch became the capital of Lithuania.

Every war that came to this land became civil, dividing the people into three enemy camps: «ours», «theirs» and «against both». The streams of emigration never stopped, but increased after each military campaign

and national uprising, followed by repressions. The majority of expats dissolved into other nations and only a few of the emigrants preserved their connection to the homeland. Nowadays over three million Belarusians live abroad, which is more than 20 per cent of the country's population. Unexpectedly, Belarusians may be met in any part of the world – in Chile, for example, people of Belarusian descent constitute four per cent of the population.

INSPIRED BY THE GREAT PAST

Ahinski's creative work keeps inspiring all kinds of emigrants. The last short period in which the idea of a national Renaissance flourished, lasted from the late 1980s till the mid 1990s. An entire generation of schoolchildren and students fell sick with the fancy of the Great Duchy of Litva. The dark side of this chronicles' fantasy was the cruel post-Soviet reality. The fairytale land had never been seen, but already lost. The abyss between «what could be» and «what really is» forced young people to make painful decisions. Among them was the decision to emigrate. No wonder, that one of Ahinski's legendary polonaise's latest remakes by Kasia Kamockaja, a mid-1990s rock star, gained unprecedented success among the young generation of the Belarusian elite. The sounds of the late 18th century keep doing their work.

Siarhei Vieramiejčyk, painter by education, left Miensk to live in Zaleśsie in 1989. Seeking calmness and peaceful village life, he had never heard of the author of the polonaises before. Eventually, the artist discovered ruins and began to collect the stories of the dynasty the locals were so proud of. Restorer by vocation, he started to restore Ahinskis' family tree and soon became an expert in it. In 2003, his book on the Ahinskis and the history of the Zaleśsie estate appeared. The villagers came to have the book signed by the author at his home. With the help of the «immigrant» from Miensk, they have rediscovered a means of being proud of the place they live in: The self-identification with something great and important that took place in their native corner many years ago. A late tribute to the father of all Zaleśsie's emigrants.

ZALEŚSIE TODAY

Today, Zaleśsie is a village in the Horadnia region of Belarus. According to the locals, it is neither the best, nor the worst place in the world to live. Two and a half hours by train to the capital, one hour to Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital. Some 1000 inhabitants. More than 1000 tourists visit the Ahinski estate each year – although, with the financing of the restoration project approaching zero lately and many enthusiasts having grown tired of combating the windmills of bureaucracy – the former Ahinski estate remains a devastated, pitiful sight.

There are mainly one-story houses, no deserted ones. Job opportunities are poor; there is one industrial enterprise in the district and a railway department. There is only one shop in the village. Absolutely all the inhabitants grow vegetables in their private kitchen gardens and in the fields. As younger people say, «the work cult» is ineradicable. Elder people tend to sow as much vegetables as they can disregarding the demand.

The population increase is higher than in any other region of the country. Nevertheless, the number of inhabitants is stable because of emigration. Yes, job seeking. The local teacher of History, Alaksandar Alaksiejevič, states that 80 percent of the school graduates enter higher educational establishments, mostly in Miensk. Only a few of them return to Zaleśsie or to the nearby rural areas after studies. There are a couple of positions at school, a vet and some staff are needed in the local administration. Salaries in the kolkhoz (collective farming) are pitifully low.

«I always tell my children that they are nothing without learning», says Alaksandar Alaksiejevič. «Look around – there isn't a single position without education required». According to him, the young citizens of Zaleśsie have no lack of motivation. Talented and strong by nature, they simply do their best in searching for life's opportunities. The History teacher himself has two sons. He doesn't expect them to stay for a long time.

Russia is a popular destination for the lower-qualified. They are mainly shift construction workers. As local people speak a mixture of Belarusian and Russian, there is no language barrier. Moreover, Belarusian pronunciation guarantees a better attitude: these people are known for their diligence.

The family stories of Zaleśsie connect the village with every capital of the world. There is not a single home here with a lack of an emigration story. With Internet people are getting closer. None-the-less, homecoming sounds incredible.

AFTERWORD

There is one more person for whom Zaleśsie is Heaven on Earth. Darja Lis is a wheelchair-bound invalid. She is also a philologist, a patriot and an online journalist, writing for non-governmental media. Emigration is one of her favorite topics because the absolute majority of her friends and classmates live in different parts of the world, mostly in the EU. She loves to chat with them using social networks.

In 2008, a book with her poetry and prose *Spring Jazz* was published. Despite the cheerful title, Darja is anxious about the strange paths people choose; the author is concerned with the fate of her neglected motherland. Being physically dependant on her wheelchair, Darja is extremely independent in her mind. She contrasts colorful reflections of nature with gloomy pictures of Miensk, the spiritual wealth of people with a miserable authoritarian regime.

Despite the beauty of the nearby pine forest, a comfortable detached house and the care of her parents, Zaleśsie is Darja's forced harbor. The wheelchair is the «little barrier» to her sacred dream – travelling. The invalid poet has no intention of repeating the routes of Michał Ahinski, she has her own plan. There are three places she wants to visit, banal for any other person, but overoptimistic in her situation. First of all, Darja would like to drink coffee in one of Hemingway's favorite restaurants in Paris. Secondly, she would like to see the Baltic Sea. And, above all, she wishes to take a walk down the narrow streets of Vilnius.

Vilnius, the Belarusian Mecca, is less than seventy kilometers from Zaleśsie, but there are too many «buts» for Darja. While all she needs is visa support, proper funding, some assistance and ... no pity for her figure.

«У сваёй краіне ва ўсіх сваіх пачынаньнях я ня бачыў больш магчымасьці быць карысным якім бы то ні было спосабам», – пісаў у мэмуарах Міхал Агінскі, аўтар палянэзу сі-бэмоль №6, што пазьней стаў вядомы як «Разьвітаньне з Радзімай». Таленавіты кампазытар, мэцэнат, лідэр шляхты, уплывовы перамоўца, прызнаны ва ўсіх дварах Эўропы, на радзіме Агінскі больш не знаходзіў для сябе месца. Вычарпаны патрыёт зьяжджаў у адчаі.

Так заняпаў яшчэ адзін уплывовы род, пакідаючы дасягненьні і славу сваіх найлепшых постацяў іншым народам. Яшчэ адна расчараваная асоба, яшчэ адна пахаваная надзея. Лёс сямейнага дрэва Агінскіх – як лёс Беларусі: раскіданыя тут і там, яго часткі рукамі выпадковых энтузіястаў складваюцца ў агульную мазаіку. Часьцяком карціна шакуе дасьледнікаў сваёй колішняй веліччу.

Сёньня былыя ўладаньні Агінскіх раскіданыя па ўсёй Беларусі, яшчэ яны ёсьць у рэгіёнах сучаснай Расіі, Літвы ды Польшчы. Маёмасная карта роду паўтарае карту Вялікага Княства Літоўскага і нагадвае пра страчаны залаты век гісторыі краю, што стаўся прататыпам Рэспублікі Беларусь. Адзін з такіх маёнткаў – вёска Залесьсе, ненадоўга ажылая мроя Агінскага, яго спраўджаная утопія, ягоныя Паўночныя Афіны…



АНДЭГРАЎНД НЕ ПА ВОЛІ
INVOLUNTARY UNDERGROUND

text by **Źmicier Kustouski, MIENSK**
photo by **Giorgos Doganis, ATHENS**

Until recently the word «underground» when applied to Belarusian music, was understood literally. The reasons for that were the multiple regulations and barriers created by restless bureaucrats that aimed to outlaw almost anything called «rock music». As a result, even totally apolitical musicians could face repression.

However, the resulting revolutionary romanticism inspired many Belarusian musicians to create an album or at least a couple of music tracks. Today, things seem to be a bit easier – in times of so-called liberalization. But no one knows how long this peace will last. And what is left for the fans who grew up listening to the revolutionary tunes, is to be nostalgic about the times when concerts were cancelled on the day when they were supposed to happen, when electricity was switched off in the clubs in the middle of a performance, and underground concerts took place at secret locations.

It was probably at the end of the 1980s when rock musicians started to express their political opinions for the first time. The USSR was crashing down in front of people's eyes and the revolutionary rockers started to promote democratic values from the stage. To be more persuasive the songs were sung in Belarusian language, making them even more radical for those times.

Since the mid 1990s there has been less and less freedom, including that of a musical kind. Lists of banned musicians, the domination of Russian music on radio stations and the endless bureaucracy required to organize a concert are obstacles to musical expression. Different ideologies, barriers, and regulations created the current situation – as a result there is no music industry in Belarus, which could be compared to equivalent industries abroad.

At the same time there are people who do not see themselves as part of such a system, who agree to perform almost free of charge, no matter how much time and effort it will take. These people promote Belarusian culture. They believe that soon everything will change, and for the better.

«THERE IS NO CLUB CULTURE IN BELARUS»

That is, according to Saša Bahdanaŭ. Saša is a good example of successful cooperation with foreign counterparts, promoting Belarusian music in both the East and West, while not forgetting his own country, spending some time here organizing parties and concerts with local and foreign stars.

Saša is 24. He almost gets annoyed when described as a «young promoter», exclaiming: «I have been doing it for six years!»

During the last two years *Bo Promo Agency*, created by Saša and the bands *Serebrianaja Svadba* and *Kasijapeja*

have held numerous concerts, at Belarusian festivals and in neighboring Russia. They have also had a number of club tours in Western Europe.

«Where do you prefer to perform: in Belarus, Russia or Europe?»
«We like performing anywhere where people are waiting for us. But I personally liked organizing concerts in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium.»

«What kind of trouble have you experienced organizing concerts in Belarus?»
«In Belarus there is no real club culture at all. There are some music venues, but they are not really clubs. The cost of performing at those venues is very high. As a result the event becomes much more expensive than in a small club in Moscow. That means that at best, we managed to break even on concerts last year, sometimes we spent more than we made on the concert.»

«So it sounds like most of the concerts organized by Bo Promo in Belarus were done so for purely altruistic reasons? Are you doing it just for your friends and yourself?»
«We are doing it so that at least something happens here. If we and the few other enthusiasts quit, then there will be nothing. There are good bands, DJs and an interested public in Belarus. It is not their fault that the bosses in the cultural department of the country do not do anything to support this field. This is why we have big plans, which also include events in Belarus.»

«I understand that there are problems with holding concerts, but what about recording and promotion?»
«It is going quite well. There are companies that invest money and develop projects, record albums. But most of them do it abroad. This aspect is not that easy in Belarus either. That is why we plan to develop our contacts with foreign companies that take an interest in our music.»

«It sounds like it is virtually impossible for a musician in Belarus to earn money through their music alone?»
«It is. *Serebrianaja Svadba* is one of the few Belarusian bands, whose members do not work anywhere else in addition to performing. Even famous bands such as *J-mors* and *Bez Bileta* haven't managed that.»

«And what about the promoters? Can they earn money from concerts, at least those where foreign musicians perform?»
«No they cannot. Even from concerts with foreign musicians. They can only break even due to cooperation with foreigners, when we arrange concerts in Moscow or Saint-Petersburg, etc. Here in our own country this field is commercially underdeveloped.»

«TO MAKE A CULTURE, A FIELD OF ONE'S OWN WITHOUT GOING ANYWHERE OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY. AND IF SOMEONE IS INTERESTED – THEY SHOULD COME AND SEE IT»

Each Belarusian region has its own understanding of music and sense of style. The few small groups, which act within their own environment, rarely get outside of their ghetto. Mahiloŭ is positively outstanding compared to the rest. Miensk could be jealous of the concentration of bands and music events in this industrial center. I asked Vital Shum to tell me about the phenomenon of Mahiloŭ rock. Vital is a well known regional promoter, and the main advertiser of Mahiloŭ music.

«Could you explain to me why, in the opinion of many, Mahiloŭ is the rock capital of Belarus? Is this just an invention?»
«No, it's not. But this is an old story. It was like that around two years ago. There was a big concentration of bands, concerts, events that were organized here, even a specific press. There is a whole culture of volunteer press in Mahiloŭ. In 1989, the first rock magazine in Belarus was started here, which was published and created by

volunteers. Before that there was some dissident literature on political matters, and suddenly this rock magazine appeared. It was called *Okorock*. 14 issues were published. During perestroika we paid the publishing houses with vodka and managed to get quite a lot of copies printed. 1000 copies of a magazine was quite a lot for Soviet times, when the music press did not exist at all. The magazine was known all over the USSR.

Then the first rock festivals were held in Mahiloŭ. And the town got the nickname «rock-Vasiuki», «capital of punk», as many famous Russian rock bands came here. For example, *Chaif*, *Kalinov Most* and *Nogu svelo*. Early *Krama* and *Mroja* concerts were also held here. Those festivals were massive. There was nothing else like that in Belarus at the time. Afterwards everything stopped for a while and in 2002 *Live Rock Center* was created. The principle of this creative community was to support talented bands. What is Mahiloŭ famous for? It has always had a developed cultural environment and subculture. And at some point a range of bands appeared that were unique due to their lyrics and poetry. There is no other community like that in Belarus. People also talk about Mahiloŭ in Russia; this is some kind of Mecca. Underground bands come here to perform. In their towns they gather around 30 people, in Mahiloŭ – 200.»

«What's so special about Miensk?»
«As in any capital, there is a lot happening in Miensk. The music scene is divided into a couple of groups. For example, there are fans of music in Belarusian language. This includes ska fans, diy-punk fans, etc. All of them are separated into small sub-cultures. And externally they don't have any influence. In other words punks, who promote anti-globablism ideas, do not have any wider impact when their concerts get only 15, 20, or sometimes 100 fans. The rest of the world does not even know about their existence. The core for forming a culture does not exist.

«And what are the achievements of Mahiloŭ rock at the moment?»
«The achievement is that you can talk about «Mahiloŭ rock» anywhere in Belarus and everyone knows that it exists, even if the only thing people have heard about it is something negative. Everyone says: *Yes, I've heard about it. I am not sure if I am familiar with the music itself, but I definitely heard that something is happening over there.* At the moment there is a state of slight crisis. It is connected with the fact that some of the bands are breaking up. We are waiting for a new wave of quality bands, for a new generation. People don't earn money from music, they have personal problems, and that is enough to force a band to break up. Musicians don't have favorable conditions for creativity and music. Unfortunately, this is the tragedy of small towns. All bands from provincial areas move to the capital if they want to grow, just like the band *Addis Abeba* which started out playing in Homiel and moved to Miensk. It is easier in Miensk. Many bands went to Moscow. The band ##### from Viciebsk also understood quite quickly that they will not achieve anything staying in their town, and that they will only be able to start going on tour after they have appeared in Moscow. And they went there to live. We try to concentrate on Mahiloŭ as a center. A center of Live Rock. We want to create some formation here, our own people, something real. We want to create our own culture without going anywhere else.

«You have many fans in Russia, in the Urals, Siberia. But why don't you want to promote your creative community and your bands in Europe?»
«The main problem is the language barrier. It is complicated to write a good song in English. And why should we? We have enough problems of our own. And they should be solved first.»

«So you are not very interested in the European music market?»
«It is not that we are not interested. It is more a question of whether we are interesting to them. We have a different mentality. I lived in Europe and I know that they have a different approach to some issues than we do. We live in a different reality. We don't care about water dripping from the tap, whereas for them it's a headache, a tragedy, and they would run around screaming *don't waste water*! Over here people would just laugh about this. So why should we stick our noses in there, there is enough to do here... They have their culture which they value, we have our own.»

«You mentioned that you used to live in Europe. And in your opinion what is the difference between Belarusian and West European music?»
«It is difficult to explain the difference just like that. Firstly, they have a whole music industry.

A band develops to a certain level then it attracts interest from promoters, who invest in it for the sake of profit. There is no such system in Belarus. This is the difference.

Now, concerning underground culture, I had a chance to live in one of the oldest universities in Europe, in Coimbra, Portugal. That looked almost like a squat. There were students from all over Europe: Italians, Spanish, Germans, etc. And in fact it was very much the same vibe as we have here, the same house parties, small concerts. So in this sense the difference is not really that big.»

«I BELIEVE THAT RUSSIAN CULTURE IS GREAT, BUT I WANT TO DEVELOP MY OWN»

Jan Maŭzer from Mahiloŭ is the frontman of one of the most successful regional rock bands in Belarus. The band contributed a lot to the rise of the Mahiloŭ rock-movement to a national level. The starting point was in 2005, when *Mauzer* won the young bands competition at the oldest Belarusian music festival *Basovišča*, which ironically has been held in Poland for the 20 years it has existed.

Jan says: «We were least appreciated in Mahiloŭ, but the prophet is never listened to in his own land». – «And where do they like you?» – «The farther away, the better.» A reason for this rejection may be that the young musicians refused to perform free of charge at a certain point and started to demand money for their shows.

«Are there other places for you in Belarus which are more interesting than Mahiloŭ?»
«I cannot say anything location wise, it depends on the people, not the territory. For example, there is a cool band *Sciana* from Bierascie. There is an opinion that rock music has a provincial character. Almost 98% of quality rock music is being made in provincial towns. Maybe it is connected with an inferiority complex. What is «rock»? Rock is close to exhibitionism, but it is also something spiritual, when you want to present yourself to people. In other words this is a «search for understanding». That is why complexes, which can be something that makes people uncomfortable, also motivate them to create good music. But it might be just a theory. There are many good bands in Miensk, too.

«And are there any differences in chances of promotion for bands from Miensk compared to bands from a provincial town?»
«There is no good promotion in either of these places. I think this is due to the generally undeveloped state of the market.»

«Have you observed any positive changes recently?»
«You know, the problems are not only connected to the legal obstacles imposed by the state. This segment of the market is just lacking. I believe that show business will start to grow only when we develop ourselves first. Concerning the regulation problems, I can only say

that we do not have trouble arranging concerts at the moment. Problems may arise at the stage of getting a special permit for the organization of a public event, which organizers have to ask for from the authorities. They may not get it. But musicians don't face that. I believe that this issue of forbidden concerts is a bit far-fetched. Of course, not everything is that good here, I don't want to say that the authorities are very tolerant of us, they don't like us. But I do think that many of the problems have been made up.»

«And nowadays, do you see the political system as an obstacle to your musical activities? Or was it much worse a couple of years ago?»
«Exactly! It was really bad a couple of years ago. For example, we were not able to play in Miensk at all. In Viciebsk we had to play in a room for 200 people, instead of one for 1000. As a result there was almost a demonstration outside the club.»

«Let's talk about the language you use. Why do you sing in Belarusian? Do you think it is important for a musician, which language he writes in?»
«This is important for Belarusian culture. I want to be an advocate of Belarusian culture. I guess I am a national-linguist. I don't think that music, which is created in Belarus but doesn't use Belarusian language can have any effect, or input to the culture. At best it would be part of Russian culture. At worst – it wouldn't be culture at all. I have nothing against Russian culture; I like it and enjoy reading Russian writers, listening to Russian music – the books and music that I personally like of course. I consider Russian culture to be great, but I want to develop my own. At some point I took a decision to start writing in Belarusian. It might seem a bit artificial, but it was not like that for me. There was some creative motivation for me. I did not use Belarusian in my daily life at that time, and when I learned a new word that impressed me I could write a poem or a text around it.»

«MUSIC IS NORMALLY WRITTEN FOR COMMON PEOPLE, PASSERS-BY, WHO ARE NOT DEEPLY ENGAGED IN CULTURE – FOR OUR NORMAL SOVIET PEOPLE»

Andruś Takindang was born in Minsk. He speaks exclusively Belarusian, thus setting a good example for his less nationally conscious countrymen, who look far more Belarusian than Andruś (Andruś is the son of a Chadian father and a Belarusian mother). Once he took part in the legendary festival *Basovišča* as a frontman of the band *Reha* and toured with them around Poland. Besides *Reha* Andruś also plays in the band *Harotnica*.

«Do you think it is possible to earn money from music in Belarus?»
«It is difficult but if you work, I think it is possible. There are examples.»

«Is music the main activity for you?»
«I also have a job. But I give lots of my time to music: rehearsals, concerts. Music is a demanding thing, it needs attention and time and effort. It has become a tradition in Belarus to pay the sound technicians, producers, that you pay to rent all the gear, but you don't have to pay the musicians. This is part of the local mentality. People think that it's enough for musicians to come and have fun on stage, but it is not true. Music is work.»

«I heard that you had a big tour around Belarus a couple of weeks ago and you visited a number of towns and performed in the streets. Could you tell me more about that?»
«This is rock-n-roll. As we are not that old yet, we want to have fun. And this is why it is useful to play in the streets sometimes. It was very important for me to take a look at those people who would never come to our

concerts. When you play in the street you have a unique audience. And it is also important. Because music is created for common people, who are not deeply engaged in culture – for our normal Soviet people. People are very cautious. A person would first stand 200 meters away, listen to what is going on. Then move a bit closer and closer. And in the end he would sing with us and couldn't be stopped. It is important for us to bring some fire to Belarusian towns, at least during our vacations.»

«Do you perform abroad?»
«We have not played abroad for quite some time. We had troubles in the band with passports. Earlier we had more concerts in Poland than in Belarus. I don't know if that is good or bad. We just play where people invite us to.»

«Do you think a band from a provincial town faces more barriers than one from Miensk?»
«I would be able to answer this question if I lived in Viciebsk or Mahiloŭ. But as I grew up and live in Miensk, I don't really know. I guess Miensk has more concerts as it is the capital, although maybe that's not true. The public in the regions is not spoiled by the diversity of bands that is why they are more frank and grateful.»

«Why do you sing in Belarusian? Is your aim to contribute to Belarusian culture?»
«I think it is the critics' job to think of such concepts as «contributing to culture», «heritage» and «revival». A normal guy who plays rock-n-roll is only thinking of how to have fun and attract the girls, earn money, become famous and just share his feelings with the public.»

Belarusian music lovers might be under the impression that alternative culture in Belarus has been in a state of recession recently. Maybe this is the way we perceive the changes which are happening in our lives now and which we will analyze in the future. These changes are due to access to more information, which was lacking before, and which cannot be limited, even by the Belarusian government. Elements of progressive creativity are coming from everywhere, making most normal people think about elementary as well as more sophisticated values. We can see the effect of globalization on Western culture, which has led to the simplification of art. Tabloids are dictating behavior; MTV is prescribing what to listen to. People live without ideas and artists give up their origins for the sake of a standardized product which will be sold to the same un-sophisticated consumers.

But there is also another side of this process. The same globalization helps to make art accessible to more people. The Internet has changed the world. Everyone can be heard and can hear everything. Maybe it has become a norm in the West, but in Belarus it is just developing now. And a whole generation, which grew up and formed their opinions in independent Belarus, are dreaming of a European Belarus. Not politically, but in terms of moral values. Amorphous parts of society are eventually going to follow the cultural figures, who might be not interested in politics at all, but understand that Belarus should develop within the European cultural context. Under the new circumstances, every talent will be recognized and will find the public they deserve depending on the ideas and values they promote.

Яшчэ зусім нядаўна панятак «андэграўнд» у беларускай музыцы ўспрымаўся літаральна. Бо шматлікія забароны й прусакі ў галаве чыноўнікаў паставілі па-за законам амаль усё, што падпадала пад назоў «рок-музыка». Часам пад «рэпрэсіі» траплялі нават зусім апалітычныя выканаўцы. Але рэвалюцыйная рамантыка падштурхнула не аднаго беларускага выканаўцу да напісаньня альбому ці пары-тройкі трэкаў. Зараз, здаецца, крыху, прасьцей – так званая «лібэралізацыя». Але ніхто не бярэцца сказаць, як доўга будзе гэты спакой. А мэляманам, што вырасьлі на рэвалюцыйных матывах, застаецца толькі з настальгіяй узгадваць зрывы канцэртаў, адрубоны сьвятла і мікрафонаў у клюбах і падпольныя кватэрнікі на канспіратыўных кватэрах…

БЕЛАРУСКАЕ GENERATION Y
BELARUSIAN GENERATION Y

by **Vola Vituška, MIENSK**

Generation Y is usually defined as a successor-generation to the «baby-boomers», or *Generation Next* and *Generation X* as they are also referred to. There is no clearly defined period in which they were born, and they are usually categorized based on certain key similarities. According to Wikipedia, members of the English-speaking *Generation Y* were born between the 1970s and 1990s.

The expression *Generation Y* appeared in August 1993 after marketing experts identified it as a separate target group. For the business community at that point *GenY* representatives were people with an explicitly practical approach to life. *Y*s are the children of *X*s. They are the first generation of people who had a chance to choose their way of life due to their financial freedom.

One can also apply this terminology to Belarus. However, it would be more logical to define the time period during which they were born as between the end of 1970s and mid 1990s. These people were born in the Soviet Union, grew up in an independent and democratic Belarus and are living at the moment under a dictatorship with a social-democratic flavor. Each of these periods effected their lives and character. The Belarusian *Generation Y* is very diverse. It does, however, have a number of common characteristics, which allow us to define it as a generation.

I would say that the peculiarities of our *Generation Y* are individuality, independence and a permanent desire to move forward. Self-actualization and independence define the vector of interesting life for young people. Our parents and sometimes even elder siblings have never dreamed of having the kind of careers we are working on, or going on international trips to far-flung countries, which have become a part of our life, or about nice and unexpected meetings which are often difficult to believe in. During the Soviet era there were not many opportunities for living your life differently. That the door to the rest of the world is open to those who want to live in it is now indubitable.

I do not remember the Soviet Union very well. That is why I do not have the nostalgia for buying an ice cream for just 1 kopejka (1 cent) or having kefir in glass bottles. I am not amazed when I see an old gas water machine which can still be found unattended in small towns in Belarus. I like old movies and songs for their warmness and sweet plots. However, I don't understand why people should watch them again and again before every New Year or sing them at the weddings and birthdays of older family members. In my opinion, the Soviet Union was rather the epoch of destruction and cruelty, when people were killed and national differences and values were destroyed. Sometimes I feel angry that we will never be able to restore most of what was destroyed and some of the past mistakes will only be solved by our grandchildren.

I remember the Perestroika period, when one of the prevailing feelings was uncertainty and insecurity. Sev-

eral years afterwards, when very rich people started to appear, people said that they managed to take advantage of that strange time to build personal fortunes. Nobody knows exactly how it was... But I am grateful to my destiny that I had a chance to grow up in Belarus when it was changing towards democracy after years of the communist regime.

Belarusians who are currently 30 years old can remember life in the USSR and hate how it was. They wore pioneer ties and were subjected to a patriotic education system. Their associations with the USSR are «little freedom, many barriers and rules and an uninteresting education in school».

My brother was twelve when the Soviet Union collapsed. His childhood was full of red attributes. But «subconsciously» he felt that «what was happening was unnatural».

«There was such a feeling that grown-ups lied to themselves for some reason. The ideals were truly ideal, but a bit unnatural and artificially imposed. That is why the feeling of freedom and having alternatives during the short existence of democratic Belarus stuck in my subconsciousness.»

Many of the people I know still live according to those ideals. The idea of a «bright future» was substituted by a common moral.

«I remember that I mentally judged those of my classmates who were exchanging or selling (which was an extraordinary act) Soviet symbols to tourists at Victory Square and then spent the foreign currency they'd earnt in one of the few shops where you could buy things with it. I remember that I did not appreciate it when one of the junior school boys came to school in a taxi. Me and my school friend were very serious about going to serve in the army in Afghanistan when we grew up. We decided that in the 2nd grade.»

There are many *GenY* representatives (in the best sense of it) among my friends. They are people with interesting life stories. They are strong and have a firm core. They have their own businesses, work as freelancers, create music, arrange cultural events, etc.

Vola and Jura are the creators of the portal *Generation.BY*. Their lifestyle is to «rely only on themselves and constantly develop».

«They often confuse egoism with individuality nowadays. Soviet ideology developed the group instinct. Our generation is very individualistic. We are those people who never became pioneers at school. Those who were older than us got into the pioneer organization and Komsomol. And we were *abandoned and unneeded* during the time when everything was changing. That is why we are so positive about public initiatives and not that much about formal organizations. I remember quite well the moment when I received the star of Okciabrionak, the symbol of the October children, a pre-pioneer childrens' organization. I was walking in the street and was so proud to have it. I liked that before that it had just been a school uniform, and then I suddenly had something cool», says Jura. «They did not force us to become pioneers as it was the first year after membership had become voluntary.»

And Vola remembers red pioneer ties with white stripes sewn on top of them in honor of the independence of Belarus.

«People who were children in the 80s sometimes feel nostalgic about everything Soviet, as youth memories are often very positive. That is why the memories of the Komsomol and compulsory agricultural work when students were digging out potatoes in the kolkhoz instead of studying are often connected to memories with positive associations of being young.»

Siarhei worked for an international automobile company after he graduated. Due to excellent results in his exams he became a financial director – first in Kiev, then in Moscow. He was managing both the accounting and finance departments when he was 23 years old. Then

Siarhei won a student grant to study financial management in Vienna and was invited to work in the Austrian headquarters of a Belarusian company. Now he is back in Belarus and continuing to develop his career.

«Although I have always worked in very good companies, I don't consider the material side of life to be a priority. Impressions and emotions are the most important and not material things. I stay in the office until late in the evening not because I am hoping for financial reward, but because I am interested in what I am doing. Of course I will probably feel differently about it when I start a family, but this will not happen in the very near future.»

Ania started to work in a small private business which she developed to a new level. She did not like that the boss was not ready to reward her initiative with a bigger salary and felt that she grew out of her position. She was dreaming of working for a big international company. And she got such a position. In one year she learned how to work under the pressure of tight time constraints and multiple tasks, but she decided that «being a robot» does not correspond to her expectations of an ideal job. And she left the company before she had an alternative lined up.

«I know for sure that I don't want to be a small piece of a huge mechanism. It consumes you; you don't feel like a person in it, but simply like a part of the system. Psychological comfort is most important to me, not status or money. I want my achievements to be appreciated and useful.»

Jula started her own professional make-up distribution company which sells cosmetics to beauty studios. While fellow students were enjoying the last months of their studies slowly finishing their theses, Jula was having an official internship in her own company. In four years her business grew in size and started to bring in considerable profits.

Jan is a co-creator of a legendary club, *Graffiti*, in Miensk. The club has an interesting interior and can fit 60-70 people, which is often not enough to let everyone attend a party or an event. Around 1500 people visit the club every month. The art department of the club is constantly generating new ideas and aspires to constant development through new projects – from literature events to modern DJ's. «How do we promote ourselves?» We do that via the Internet and that is enough. Word of mouth is especially important. People share their impressions with others after they have attended an unusual, interesting, unique event which they have not heard of before, which they did not know existed. Giving our guests a positive impression is the most important factor in success and gaining a good reputation. Wide communication channels as mass media are of no major use to us, as we are not looking for visitors from the general public. In other words the average Twitter-user is not exactly the same as a viewer of the 1st music TV channel.

We want to create a warm atmosphere, similar to what you feel when visiting friends or at home. Our target group is between 22 and 35 years old, people with interesting personalities, they are simple, sincere and open, and don't make any effort to be cooler than the rest. We don't care what car they drive to the club in or what their day job is. We are interested in the people and not their social status. I would say we are the antithesis of most Miensk clubs. I think that most of the more or less interesting people in Miensk might have already visited *Graffiti* and formed an opinion about it. And for me personally the most important things are self-actualization and the freedom to be creative. I need positive diversity.»

Information technologies have become an important part of our dynamic lives. Ihar, who currently works as a Software Engineer for Google in Switzerland, calls the Internet «an unlimited space for information and communication».

«The ability to work with the World Wide Web significantly increases work productivity and gives people opportunities to search for jobs all around the world. Now you don't have to go to another part of the city to buy something; you don't have to stay in a line to pay telephone bills; to find out news about a friend who lives abroad, you don't have to wait for two weeks for a letter. Thanks to the Internet many useful things have become available free of charge where before you had to pay for everything. And thanks to the Internet I am working

for a company whose services are used by hundreds of millions of people. Every change I make effects the productivity of these millions of people».

Natasha works for a dynamic mobile company. Since she is creative and courageous and is not afraid to express her opinion she gets to manage strategically important projects, which makes her older colleagues envious. She has a lot of experience of participating in different kinds of events and likes to challenge herself. I remember when she worked in the US as a cashier. She was once serving a serious American family. Their daughter – who was our age – said with amusement: «Oh! You are so clever! You came from across the ocean and count something in the computer!» It sounded funny to us as we didn't see anything extraordinary in what we were doing.

«I want to see and feel the whole world! I don't want things like a car, a flat, work and family to become my only goals and restrain me. It is much cooler to rent a flat for a month in Paris than buy a small one in Miensk!»

I want everything (preferably to have more than others) and to break the vicious circle of predetermination where you feel like a bear on a bicycle in the circus who repeats well trained tricks according to the same scenario: kindergarten, school, university, work, marriage, kids, pension...

I don't want to get stupid. I want to learn new things everyday; I want to be dominantly intelligent! I want to open a shelter for homeless animals. Also I want to buy a piano when I get old and play four handed pieces with the beloved one, the best man in the world.

My priorities are peace and good health, and if you have them it is easy to fall in love and succeed personally.»

Our associations with Soviet childhood are TV and Valery Leontiev, the color red everywhere, demonstrations and the pain of people, vinyl records, big cans of black caviar, Kashpirovski, imported modern things, Moscow, a stain on Gorbachev's head. But we did not live in the USSR, which is why we don't remember it well. Our memories from adolescence are the first imported goods, leggings, Snickers, Coca-Cola, video, tape recorders, cooperatives, «8th TV channel», America.

«Maybe *Generation Y* is just one of the words from marketing terminology; however, we feel our distinctiveness not only in our age. As never before, modern young people make their predecessors look around and learn from their children. The changes brought by information technology is that fast», says Jura.

«Old people might recognize themselves 20 years earlier in the words and stories of people our age. However, the first Belarusian generation which was brought up during the period of rapid changes received unlimited opportunities at the very beginning of their grown-up life. *Generation Y* became the first generation of the 3rd millennium of human civilized existence.»

Wikipedia тлумачыць фэномэн «пакаленьня Y» як пасьлядоўнікаў пакаленьня «бэбі-бумэраў» X ці як generation next. Гады нараджэньня «пакаленьня Y» вызначаюцца досыць умоўна. Для англамоўнай моладзі межы пакаленьня адзначаюць паміж сярэдзінай 70-х і позьнімі 90-мі.

Сам тэрмін «пакаленьне Y» упершыню зьявіўся ў жніўні 1993 пасьля вылучэньня маркетолягамі «пакаленьня Y» у асобную мэтавую групу. Прадстаўнікоў гэтага пакаленьня тагачасная бізнэс-супольнасьць акрэсьліла як людзей зь ярка выражаным практычным стаўленьнем да жыцьця. Y – гэта дзеці X. Гэта першая пляяда людзей, якія, дзякуючы пэўнай фінансавай свабодзе, атрымалі магчымасьць абіраць свой стыль жыцьця. Сваю будучыню юнакі сталі пралічваць на гады наперад.

Для Беларусі тэрмін «пакаленьне Y» таксама прымянальны. Але гадамі нараджэньня людзей гэтага пакаленьня больш лягічна лічыць пэрыяд паміж канцом 70-х і сярэдзінай 90-х. Гэта пакаленьне людзей, якія нарадзіліся ў часе існаваньня Савецкага Саюзу, сталелі ў дэмакратычнай Беларусі, жывуць зараз у дыктатуры з рысамі сацыял-дэмакратыі. Кожны з такіх розных этапаў іх жыцьця наклаў свой адбітак на характары і лёсы. І самі людзі Y вельмі розныя. Але, як складнікі любой супольнасьці, яны маюць агульныя рысы...



photos p. 81 - 86 by **Katrin Krämer, BIELEFELD**











АПОШНІ ТЭРМІН DEADLINE

Essay on the Problems of Writing About a Belarusian Village

by **Vital Voranaŭ, MIENSK**

When I applied to join the *Inside-Out* project, I had not realized that writing about a Belarusian village, a topic that I had proposed myself, would turn out to be quite so problematic. I spent considerably more time in Vudziela, my village, than Thoreau did in his make-shift dwelling on Walden Pond. He wrote a three hundred page book about spending two years living in the wild. I have only been able to write the recollections of my childhood in miniatures, but elected not publish them here. I feel that they are as yet incomplete and they would not suit this magazine.

I joined the project as a writer, but as the project progressed, I got the impression that the venture I had joined was rather journalistic. I tried to be a journalist for a while, and to write down stories, not of my own, but rather of old people who are still living in the half-dead villages of the Viciebsk region. Together with a German photographer, I traveled from West to East in the northern part of Belarus, seeking good shots and people who would be willing to tell us stories, in exchange for a portrait of their life.

It turned out to be a good deal; within a few days, I had jotted down some interesting stories and we decided that each story would go along with a portrait of the person who told it. However, with time, we started to notice that some good stories were connected with people who were no longer there. Therefore, we came to the conclusion that we should concentrate rather on taking photos of the places connected with the characters in the stories we were being told. We proceeded in this way for another two days: my companion taking photos of rundown and abandoned cabins, with a particular focus on the remnants of life which were around, while I searched for stories about the dead owners of empty houses. This turned out to be another false trail, as some stories lacked the cabin, and some cabins lacked good stories, or neighbors or relatives who would talk about them.

That is why I proposed to concentrate on my village, a place we had previously been to, and report on it as a focus point illustrative of life in any village in the region and the whole of Belarus. We did go back to the village but gave up as soon as we arrived. I realized that it was too personal a place for me to write about with the impartiality requisite of the journalistic discipline. The last few days of the project we spent experimenting with aspects of what we had set out to do. We even took portraits of ourselves, hoping that the story of our getting into people's houses would make up a narrative. But our deadline was within the month.

From the very start, my fundamental approach to working in tandem with a photographer, was of telling one «story», and not two parallel ones; with that, I waited for the pictures, to see what we have and what we can make of it. On our journey, I had seen her taking the photos and the views she was capturing, but never

the photos themselves, as she was working with a film and an old-fashioned camera, with a «reverted image» preview screen. While she did her work in the dark room, I continually noted what would be corresponding stories, recording our visits. One story was about a girl who was left by a boy she loved, after many years of dating, which destroyed her dreams of a married life with him. She attacked his wife after the wedding ceremony, splashing animal dung on her dress, and lambasting her with curses. The wife died a few years later when, going with her neighbor to an underground store room, both suffocated from an unknown gas; the wife leaving three children behind. The girl who had spoilt the wedding married her beloved man less than a year after his first wife's death and took care of the three children, never having children of her own. It inspired me to collect stories connected with mystery, witchery, and local tragedies – the big affairs of simple people.

Nevertheless, it emerged as too ambitious a project to complete in a week – witchery, and traditional pagan culture, is rarely practiced nowadays and difficult to collect data on, even in less than modernized Belarus. Another argument for not telling that story is that it would do the Belarusian village a disservice, stereotyping it as the scene of ceaseless disaster and misfortune. Betraying that coherence, another story I heard reminded me that an honest portrayal of life there has to include not only tragedy, but also happiness. One old woman told us about the funniest moment of her life, which surprisingly, overlapped with the arrival of the Bolsheviks to the western part of Belarus, at that time occupied by Poland. It was the first time she and the people in her village, consisting of twenty one houses, saw a plane. Literally all of them, young and old, as she said, left their houses and abandoned their everyday work to look at the plane as it flew over a big field. As it went westward they happily ran behind it, and when it went to the north, they chased it that way with loud screams and laughs. It went on like this for more than half an hour, after which the pilot threw them a note with a short message: «Get out of the field, I am trying to land here.» The woman finished the story and started to laugh like a kid, and for a while we saw a happy little girl in front of us, and not a melancholic woman, reflecting back on her life, rather than looking forward.

I was immediately captivated by the idea of collecting only anecdotal moments like this, to balance the sad old faces and the decrepitude of the surrounding. My initial inspiration of the foresaken-looking villages had been surpassed, by some of the people in the portraits not being sad at all, but on the contrary, glittering with happiness; for a moment somebody focused only on them and they could not help but smile. Finally, I realized that we should tell different kinds of stories, sad and hilarious, amazing and plain, universal and pretty contextual; like yet another one, about a woman who mistakenly slept in the same bed with her drunken neighbor, thinking it was her husband, who came back home later to find them there. As he stood in front outside his own house, she thought he was a stranger, and argued with him that her real husband was already sleeping in his bed. Given the pictures my photographer sent me, I have chosen those which portrayed little details of the households. They seemed to go perfectly with particular qualities of life in a Belarusian village. A photo of a big dining table with moonshine on it would complement the story of those unfortunate hunters whose prey, a wild boar, escaped them, after they brought it home, and prematurely celebrated, thinking the pig was «very dead». Inspiring fragments of old-fashioned buffets, mirrors, pillows, and shaving tools would find their counterparts in plot.

This was the first time I disagreed with my companion over the final result, with her maintaining that the fragments did not give an overall picture, while I insisted that they did, in an artistic way. At last we came to the conclusion that they would be a piece of comprehensible art only to those who know what the overview looked like. Arriving at this understanding, for whom we were writing our project was nevertheless without conceptual unity only a few days prior to deadline. With some contradiction to my initial assumptions and ambitions, I proposed that my project partner compose her own photo story, as it was aimed to function independenly and I would spend the last days before the upcoming deadline, fitting my stories together, so that the whole might still work together as one.

I was disillusioned one more time. Not with the picture selection, as it is exceptionally good, but with the stories of the Belarusian village. I was brought up there as a child. I was sure that I would know how to chronicle its life from the inside, but I was wrong. Belarusian village life is now dying, and this is not the village I remember, the place which already lacked children in my time, though still full of life. My village was full of colorful cabins none of which were empty. I would be able to tell you the story of my village in that time, but my photographer would not be able to contribute images from that time; although still there – everything has changed in the meantime. I could tell you how ghostly life in today's Belarusian rural area has become, but that would not be true – many people are still very happy to live their less than perfect life, there. Focusing on the positives of contemporary life in a Belarusian village would be wrong, as it is undoubtedly dying out, taking away a layer of traditional culture, leaving us ill suited to city life. I wanted badly to tell a story that is crucial, not only to me, of the Belarusian village, and I am not prepared to tell a passive, sad story of its passing. The Belarusian village is looked upon from extremely different perspectives even in Belarus, outside observers aside. Some people associate it with a post-kolkhoz landscape which is not worth going to or thinking about; some try to revive it under the new-old brand of «agrotowns»; some are trying to sell their parents cabins even for symbolic money, to be able to put it in the past, both good and bad; and some are trying to look upon it as the corner stone of a tremendous spiritual life which, even to the extent that it lingers, is heavily obscured; for me it is a «dead line» which I do not want to cross yet. Ironically, I know how I should not write about the Belarusian village, but I still have no idea how the story ought to be told, if told at all. Sometimes silence can be more telling. But this is a kind of a story too...

Падаючы заяву на ўдзел у праекце *Belarus Inside Out*, я не ўсьведамляў, што пісаць пра беларускую вёску – тэма, якую я прапанаваў сам, – выявіцца настолькі складаным. У сваёй вёсцы Вудзела я правёў нашмат больш часу, чым амэрыканскі пісьменьнік Генры Тора ў сваім часовым прытулку на Ўолдэнскай сажалцы. Пра двухгадовы досьвед пражываньня ў глушы ён напісаў кнігу на трыста старонак. Я пакуль што здолеў напісаць адно ўспаміны свайго дзяцінства ў мініятурах, але пастанавіў не публікаваць іх тут: адчуваю што яны яшчэ няпоўныя, па другое, яны наўрад ці б пасавалі да гэтага часопісу.

Я далучыўся да праекту як літаратар, але падчас працы зразумеў, што задума, да якой я далучыўся, мае з большага журналісцкую накіраванасьць. На пэўны час я паспрабаваў быць журналістам і запісаць гісторыі не свайго аўтарства, але пачутыя ад старых людзей, якія дажываюць у напаўмёртвых вёсках Віцебшчыны. Разам зь нямецкай фотамайстаркай мы распачалі падарожжа з захаду на ўсход паўночнай часткі Беларусі ў пошуку добрых кадраў і людзей, якія захочуць апавесьці нам свае гісторыі ў абмен на партрэт свайго жыцьця.

Гэта падалося добрым гешэфтам, бо за пару дзён я накрэсьліў некалькі цікавых апавяданьняў, і мы пастанавілі, што кожны аповед павінен суправаджацца выявай асобы, якая сваім аповедам з намі падзялілася…



БЕЛАРУСКАЕ ЭКАПАСЕЛІШЧА: ПРОСТАЕ ШЧАСЬЦЕ НАЗІРАЦЬ ЗАХАДЫ І БУДАВАЦЬ СВОЙ ДОМ

THE SIMPLE PLEASURE OF WATCHING THE SUNSET AND BUILDING A HOME OF YOUR OWN

Life in a Belarusian Eco-Village

text by **Kaciaryna Biezmaciernych, MIENSK**
photos by **Katrin Krämer, BIELEFELD**

They don't watch TV in Belarusian eco-villages. As long-haired artist Andrey, who also writes fairy tales, explains: «We have satellite TV of our own. We sit on the swings or under a tree and watch the sunset.» His young wife Anastasija adds: «And the sunset can never be the same.» The eco-villagers build ecological houses out of clay and straw, learn to earn money through crafts. And if they get a pig, they do not kill it, but use it as help in the garden! This article was inspired by staying in *Rosy* (in the vicinity of Miensk) and *Zvon-hara* (in the vicinity of Viciebsk).

INTRODUCTION

A public movement for the creation of eco-villages was started in Russia and is called the «Clinking Cedars of Russia». In Belarus, there are only two villages like this at the moment – outside of Miensk and Viciebsk. They are around five years old, the inhabitants are actively building houses and the fragile cedar trees planted here are so small, that an unprepared visitor can easily step on them without noticing. Ten more eco-villages are set to be started up in different parts of Belarus. The movement organizes conferences and seminars in Miensk and other cities.

Every family within this movement builds a house on a one hectare area – their own eco-system. The borders of the territory are marked with trees and bushes instead of a fence. Some also have a small forest, a pond, swings and other things to entertain themselves.

«ROSY» NEAR MIENSK, «ZVON-HARA» NEAR VICIEBSK

Young families in their late 20s and early 30s constitute the majority of the inhabitants of such eco-villages, where nights are filled with the sound of birds, humming of insects and other living creatures.

Rosy is the biggest eco-village in Belarus. There are 28 plots in total. Ten families live here permanently, others are still preparing to move in. The Nalibockaja Pušča (deep forest) begins in *Rosy*. There is also a river, the Isłač, three kilometers from the village. In the forest there is a guest house with a kitchen, and a book shelf which includes titles like *Building a fire-place with your own hands, A herbs register* and *The Sacred calendar of druids*.

A home-made colorful map of *Rosy* with funny poems written by the settlers decorates the wall. In the garden there is a bonfire site underneath a skillfully built shed, where I am meeting some frequent visitors to *Rosy*. Programmer Kościa comes to *Rosy* to communicate with nice people and to meet his future neighbors. Soon he wants to settle down here himself.

BREAKING THE «HOME-OFFICE-HOME» CIRCLE

The enthusiasts from *Zvon-hara*, which consists of 13 plots of land and has two families living there permanently, found an abandoned village, cut the grass which had covered everything and began to build new houses. In *Zvon-hara* there is silence and lots of space.

«We saw birches blooming in the spring», smiles Lena from *Zvon-hara*. The inhabitants of an eco-village are very different from one another, but at the same time they share a few things in common. At least in terms of finding their truth not in the heart of a city, but under a country sky covered with stars.

Most of them have higher education degrees. There are lawyers, many programmers, teachers. Many really enjoyed their jobs back then – when they were part of city life.

Chatty and energetic Ira from *Rosy* has been studying German since she was ten. Having graduated, she got an interesting job, you could foresee her future steps up the career ladder. «However, I kept asking myself: is that all? All for the rest of my life? Until retirement? In between a short vacation – and then the same all over! Is this my destiny? Certainly, I was afraid to leave behind everything that I have been doing for the last twenty years... But now, in the eco-settlement, it occurred to me, that my self-realization as a human being is much more versatile!»

Naścia, a web-designer who now lives in *Rosy*, had the same thoughts when she was living in the city. «I liked my job, but it wore me out: commuting took forever, then you work and work, then you go shopping. But the feeling of happiness is gone. Things are always the same. I did not feel complete, something was artificial. Here, on the contrary, there is plenty of interesting work. Every time there is something new! I look at my kid and cannot picture her inside an apartment. Look, I put her on the grass, gave her a dandelion to eat the sweet pollen, but she turned the flower around and eats the bitter side. And looks so pleased! It must be coming from nature. I observe my daughter watching birds, wind. You have no right to deprive your children of this.»

Anastasija from *Zvon-hara* who used to sew clothes in the city, says: «Everyone has something in themselves, some seed that starts to grow and reveals itself only here. This place brings the feeling of self understanding.»

Some things which were necessary in the city became useless here. «In the eco-village we don't care that much about clothes. Actually we don't care about them at all...», says Nataša from *Zvon-hara*. Food preferences also change. Ira and Maksim, who live in *Zvon-hara*, became raw foodists. They don't eat any meat, only fruit and vegetables. They do not boil cereals or cook them in any other way. Instead they leave them to soften in water.



The eco-villagers like to talk about their role on planet earth, about how strong an idea can be. They speak about love – to each other, to their chickens, to the plants. Almost nobody eats meat here. Andrey from *Zvon* says: «I saw tears in my granny's eyes, when they were killing a pig. And then granny calmed down and ate a cutlet. Strange! She gave her pig a name, took care of it, loved it, and then she ate it! We question many things here. Do we need that in our lives? You can eat porridge, salads and then work all day, and keep fit!» The inhabitants of eco-villages also feel as if the space around their houses is alive. They say it soaks people's attention.

The word «freedom» is often mentioned in conversation here. The eco-villagers state that they have experienced much more of it here than in the city. Saša from *Rosy*, who is a renowned hitch-hiker, says: «I feel trapped in the city. I always have to work for someone there. And here I feel that I am the master of my own destiny.» I also heard them mentioning «responsibility» – for every step they make, for their relationships with nature and within their families.

THIS PLACE INSPIRES THINKING

A family consisting of a man and a woman is essential for a family estate. From the outside it seems as if the relationships here possess something that is lacking in the city. Ira says: «In the city people often live together without a common goal. And here we have so much in common! There are so many opportunities to help each other and reveal one's talents. The land serves as a test. It either accepts your union or shows that you don't belong to each other. Singles – they are a city phenomenon.»

Are these intelligent, cultivated and educated people not missing something? Not at all! In order to build a household and find ecologically clean and interesting methods to do so, they read a lot of books with interest. For example, deep ploughing degrades the quality of the soil, which had already been proven by Asvinski in the 19th century. That is why potatoes are planted into straw that has been lying there for one and a half years. This place encourages thinking. It inspires you to build a nice shelter, you want to construct benches. «We do not separate ourselves from the city. We are the same as we were when we lived there, but we are richer. We sometimes go to the theater all together. Our aim is to create an infrastructure that will enforce an exchange between the city and the country», says Andrey. They also plan to organize a school and to build an amphitheater.

They are very friendly to each other. They openly share secrets about organizing households, arrange communal meetings, visit each others' homes. They watch movies together on the computer. They enjoy holidays when they learn songs, invite many friends. On the last *Kupalle* (the shortest day of the year) 150 people gathered in *Rosy*. But guests also come on normal days, some of them come from abroad. The eco-villagers organize social projects. For example, they planted cedar trees in front of the National Library.

Where do they get their money from? At the moment many of them still work full-time or part-time in the city. But they claim that this is only temporary. They have to be creative about income. Andrey produces hand-made barrels for sale. Ina, Alena and Ała have started to produce stylish apparel made of linen, embroidered with magic Slavic talismans. Some help people with the construction of their own houses, dig wells. Saša received a certificate of being an eco-farmer and sells products from his garden. His family also breeds french bulldogs.

«Life is a creature that turns its face to those who act according to their real wishes and act courageously. Then everything goes well!», said Andrey. We drank tea in their small house, over our heads dry herbs were hanging under the ceiling. On the wall was a painting done by Andrey. In the picture there was a pond, a nice estate and happy people. «This is an image of our future common house», he explains.



У беларускіх экапаселішчах кінулі глядзець тэлевізар. Доўгавалосы мастак Андрэй, які яшчэ і казкі выдумляе, кажа: «У нас ёсьць сваё спадарожнікавае тэлебачаньне. Сядаем на арэлі альбо проста пад дрэвам і глядзім на захад.» «І захад ніколі не бывае аднолькавым», – дадае яго маладая жонка Анастасія. Яны будуюць экалягічныя дамы з гліны і саломы, вучацца зарабляць грошы рамёствамі. А калі парсюка прыдбаюць, дык не для забойства, а каб на гародзе дапамагаў! Артыкул натхнёны гасьцяваньнем у «Росах», што пад Менскам, на ўскрайку Налібоцкай пушчы. І ў «Звон-гары», што пад Віцебскам.

Грамадзкі рух стварэньня экапаселішчаў распачаўся ў Расіі і завецца «Зьвінячыя кедры Расіі». У Беларусі пакуль – два паселішчы, пад Менскам і пад Віцебскам. Ім каля паўдзясятка гадоў, у разгары будаўніцтва дамоў, а крохкія маладыя кедры госьць можа зь лёгкасьцю раздавіць, не заўважыўшы. Яшчэ па ўсёй Беларусі фармуецца дзесяць раскіданых экапаселішчаў. Ладзяцца сустрэчы, канфэрэнцыі і праекты ў Менску ды іншых гарадох…

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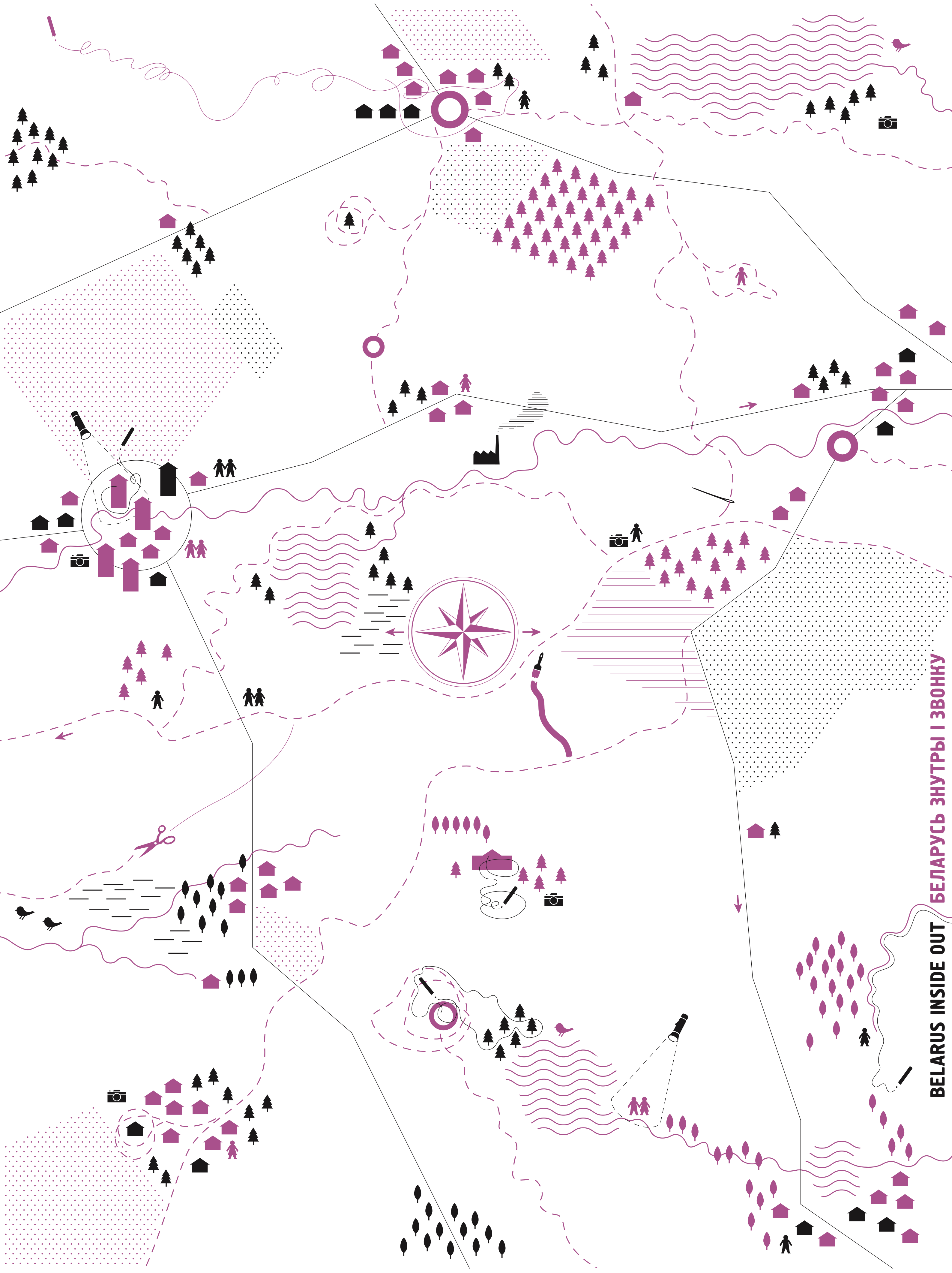
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